

JASON HAMILTON



IN CREATION'S HEART

ROOTS OF CREATION BOOK 8
AN EPIC YA FANTASY ADVENTURE

In Creation's Heart

Roots of Creation Book 8

Jason Hamilton

Story Hobby Media

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Author's Note

About the Author

Also by Jason Hamilton

The dank hallway held nothing of its former glory, the light replaced with shadow, and the cheer replaced with despair.

Jak walked down the passage she had once known over two years ago as part of the Queen's Palace at Skyecliff. But like the city itself, the palace was mostly a ghost town, a shell of what it once was.

In one hand she held a small orb of fire to light the way, in the other, she carried a Pillar of Eternity, the Pillar of Space. It was one of two, and unfortunately the other still remained with her greatest enemy, Cain. Yet there were no demons as Naem had reported. Only a pair of curious eyes, that disappeared the moment Jak turned her head to meet them, indicated that someone was still left.

Behind her walked some of the last people she would have ever expected to be beside her a year ago. Naem, the man who had become her friend and even something more than a friend, had eventually betrayed her. But he had successfully atoned for his mistakes, and now represented her greatest asset. He, like her, was an Oren, one of the fabled individuals who could give out multiple brands.

Beside him stood the man with no name, the Royal Priest who supposedly gave up his name when he chose to serve the holy ancestors. He had almost killed Jak once, but she had saved his life just two months prior, shown him the majesty of Illadar, and both had wrought a change on the man. Though she wasn't certain how much she could trust him just yet.

At least she had nothing to fear from him physically anymore. After having recently learned of her ability to give herself more of the same brand, she'd made sure her body was covered with Healing and Toughness brands. She was pretty sure she could withstand those explosives that came from the eastern countries, even if she held them in her hand when they went off.

"Do you even think she'll be here?" said Naem. "After everything that's happened in Skyecliff?"

"There's still someone here," said Jak, catching the hint of a door closing ahead of them. They checked the door but saw no one.

Whoever it was moved fast. "That means there aren't any demons at least. The queen could be anywhere, but I see no reason why she would have left."

"This place is not right," said the Royal Priest, glancing around. "There's a weight surrounding this place. A curse."

"One you and she likely brought upon yourselves," said Naem with a slight bitterness to his voice.

Jak put out a hand to calm Naem. "The Royal Priest helped me get my abilities back," she said. "We shouldn't blame him for past mistakes if he's choosing to help now." She glanced back at Naem as she said that. He glanced at his feet, remembering the time he had even betrayed her to the Priest.

"I'm not sure I can do anything to fix this," said the Royal Priest. His head still swiveling from side to side, taking in the damp walls, and the darkness that surrounded them.

"I'm not sure anyone could," Jak conceded. "This kingdom is in ruins, it will need to be built again from the ground up, or abandoned completely. It has fallen to Cain's demons."

"So where are they?" remarked Naem.

"I don't know," Jak furrowed her brow, troubled. "We haven't seen any demons since we got here, nor any sign of Cain."

"He realized he was no match for you," said the Royal Priest, a hint of something like hope in his voice.

"He's more than a match for me," said Jak. "Though I'll admit that could change soon enough." She thought back to Marek, her old friend who had been taken by Cain and perverted, but who still fought against him in his own way. He had been the real reason why she'd regained her Pillar of Eternity from Cain at Tradehall, and why she was now able to use her brands where before it hadn't been possible due to a Void brand. Of course, Marek had also been responsible for giving her that Void brand in the first place, but perhaps he only did it knowing she would rid herself of its power eventually.

They reached two enormous oak doors, with elaborate carvings depicting a scene from some famous battle or other. Jak didn't pause to take it in. Instead, she pushed against the doors with a strong burst of telekinetic magic. They swung open with a crashing sound that shook the chamber beyond.

Jak had been here once before, when she had been brought for an audience with the queen. That had been a long time ago, at least it seemed that way. Back then she had been bathed and dressed in the most ridiculous frilly clothes one could imagine. Now she was back in loose, comfortable travel clothes. She didn't even bother to wear armor anymore. Her Toughness brands made such things redundant.

The queen was nowhere to be seen. The audience chamber

remained as bleak and empty as the hallways they had passed to get here.

“Her quarters are just behind this room,” said the Royal Priest, walking past Jak to take the lead. “If she is in Skyecliff, we have the best chance of finding her there.”

Jak said nothing but followed the Royal Priest forward until he disappeared behind some dusty, tattered drapes. She and Naem followed to see the Royal Priest grab the handle of two large double doors. They weren’t nearly as large as those leading into the audience chamber, but they were equally ornate.

The Royal Priest pulled, and the doors opened. Jak stepped through to see another room much like the others, dark and damp, but illuminated somewhat by the light of the moon that streamed through large windows at the far end. Jak forgot just how little light the moon provided here. Illadar had two moons, both of which were brighter than Earth’s.

However, what immediately caught her attention was a huddled form on an enormous bed in the center of the room. It could only be the queen.

Jak stepped forward, “Queen Telma?” she said as she drew closer. The woman was whimpering, as if frightened, but also seemingly unaware that they had entered the room. “We want to talk.”

She reached out a hand to touch the queen’s shoulder. The woman still wasn’t facing her.

At her touch, the queen whirled around in the bed, her eyes wide and her face pale. Jak almost took a startled step back, but controlled herself.

“Relic wonders, ancestors behold us, they see us in our chambers, they ravage us,” the queen wasn’t making any sense. She was rambling. “You bring their eye, the hundred eyes, the eyes that bore. The songs of eyes!” She turned back away from them continuing to murmur to herself.

“What has happened to her?” said the Royal Priest in a whisper.

Jak reached for the queen’s nearest arm, though the queen immediately tried to pull away at her touch. “It’s okay,” said Jak, holding the woman’s arm firmly in her Strength-enhanced grip. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Sing the songs, sing the eyes,” the queen rambled as Jak checked her body. Sure enough, a second brand lay on her arm, just above her first brand. It was one Jak recognized, though she had never performed it herself. Cain had once used the brand against her, though it had been branded on a metal shackle she had worn, a sort of mind-control brand. Cain had mentioned that when branded on flesh, it had a tendency to drive the victim mad.

Jak sighed, closing her eyes. "She is beyond saving," she said at last. She pointed at the new brand on Telma's arm. "This is a mind control brand, it has overrun her mind. She's little more than a demon right now."

"She doesn't look like a demon," said Naem, his eyes still on the queen.

Jak glanced back at the ruined woman. "No, not a demon, but she isn't likely to be able to help us."

"Should we kill her?" said Naem, his voice grave.

"No!" said the Royal Priest, moving instinctively to place himself between Naem and the queen.

Jak kept her eyes on the queen as she continued to mutter nonsense. They could kill her, and they probably should. Despite her madness, Cain had ultimate control over the woman with that brand. He could use her for ill. But what more could she do here? The city was already in ruins, and after today, no one would be left to suffer at her hands or Cain's.

"No," she said. "It may be cruel to let her live in this misery, but we cannot kill her like this."

Naem nodded, not bothering to protest. "So what's our next move?"

Jak stood straight. "Well with the queen out of the picture we do what we came here for."

They hurried to the queen's bath chambers, a large room at the other end of the palace, with openings that overlooked the city. Jak had been there once before, when the large pools were full of hot, steaming water. But when they arrived, none of that was the same. Part of the wall was partially blown in. Jak had been partially responsible for that, from the last time she had infiltrated the palace to rescue some friends. Now they were here to do the same thing, only this time no one appeared to stop them.

"There are people here," said Naem, glancing around at the closed doors. "Someone is taking care of the queen. Why would they stay?"

Jak didn't answer, but stepped through the rubble of the wall that had never been fully cleared, to get a good look at the bathhouse.

Several eyes stared back at her, peering over the edges of the pools of water. Jak caught glimpses of large fish-like tails making small splashes behind them. They had found the Water Fae.

"All of you," Jak said, raising her voice slightly. "I'm here to get you out. My name is Jak."

Some of them raised themselves a little higher at that. They had heard of her, even cooped up in the palace like prisoners. They knew who led the Fae.

The nearest of the bunch raised himself onto the edge of the bath with his arms. "How will you get us out?"

"That's not the problem here," said Jak, fingering the Pillar of space. "How have all of you survived so far? Who is keeping you alive?"

"There is a girl," said another of the Water Fae, a woman. "She comes here with scraps. There hasn't been much recently."

Jak could imagine that. Even if someone was taking it upon themselves to care for the Fae, there weren't any stores entering the city. They would run out eventually.

"Where is this girl now?"

Something between a whimper and a squeak sounded behind her. She turned her head to see the girl in question peeking around the

door. She wasn't a "girl" really. She was probably about Jak's age, though far skinnier and weak. She looked like she was scared to death.

"I know you," said Jak, turning around completely. "Were you there to help me change for an audience with the queen."

The girl said nothing, but nodded. Jak took a step forward, but stopped when the girl seemed to retreat a bit. "What's your name?" she asked.

"N...Nessa?"

"And you've been keeping all these Fae alive?"

Nessa nodded, "And the queen too. She...she doesn't eat on her own."

"We've seen the queen," said Jak, profoundly grateful that they hadn't killed the insane woman now. "She is beyond saving."

"I've been trying," said Nessa in a whimper, tears coming to her eyes.

"We cannot thank you enough for that," said Jak, putting one hand on the girl's shoulder. "And for keeping these Fae alive. Not everyone would have done that."

The girl nodded, and wiped at her nose.

"Though I am curious, why didn't you take them outside, to the ocean."

Nessa's eyes quivered. "There are demons out there."

"Not anymore," said Naem. "We checked. There isn't a demon for miles around Skyecliff."

"Really?" said Nessa, the first glimmer of hope lighting her eyes.

"Really. And we're here to help," said Jak, straightening. "You don't have to worry about your next meal anymore. If you'll come with me, we'll take you to Illadar. It's a place far away from here, but there's plenty of food, and the demons can't get to you there. Are you here alone?"

Nessa nodded, "All the others decided to leave, or they...or they got eaten by demons." Her eyes seemed to grow wider at the memory. "But...the queen was still here, and the Water Fae. I couldn't leave them." "You've done a good thing, Nessa," said Jak.

The girl looked between the three of them, before pointing to the Royal Priest. "Are you with them?"

"I..." the Priest looked at Jak and Naem. "I suppose I am, though a lot has changed since I was here last."

"He isn't here to cause trouble," said Jak, measuring the skeptical look on Nessa's face. Chances were, she didn't trust the Royal Priest, and who could blame her.

"He hurt us," said one of the Water Fae. The voice was bitter. Yes, they would remember the Priest and everything he had done to them. The man had been vile, experimenting on the Water Fae and

producing horrors that Jak didn't want to think about, especially when she kept the man around as a companion now. Not a companion she fully trusted, but not an enemy either.

"Perhaps," the Priest began slowly. "Perhaps it would be better if I stayed here instead of going back with you."

Jak met the man's eyes. "You realize that might be a death sentence."

He nodded. "Maybe, but not everyone will go with you, and someone has to stay behind to put the city back in order, make contact with the surrounding farms, and...and at least stick around to care for Telma."

Jak pressed her lips together. "Are you sure? I don't necessarily know when we'll be back."

"Illadar is not my blessing," said the Royal Priest, his face carved from marble. "I do not deserve it. The least I can do is try to repair some of the damage that I've done."

For a moment, Jak just stared at the man. But he seemed serious. And he was right. Someone would have to stay behind if they wanted the city to live on in any way. Jak doubted many would stay behind, but for those who did, they needed something to live for.

"Very well," she said, and reached out to clasp the man's hand. "We will take all who wish to come with us, and leave you be."

The Royal Priest nodded. "I think I will return to the queen, as I am less welcome here," he said, with a glance around the room. His face didn't look betrayed or vengeful. Instead, his eyebrows were upturned in an expression of regret. Then he turned and proceeded back the way they had come.

Jak watched him go before he disappeared around the corner. Despite what he had done, she wished him the best in his attempts to rebuild. It would not be an easy task, especially not with the queen in the condition she was in.

She turned back to Nessa and the Water Fae. "I assume all of you would like to join me?" A chorus of nods answered her question. "Very well, I am first going to take you to the shores beneath the city, to join with as many others as wish to travel with us."

"How are you going to take us there?" said one of the Water Fae.

Jak cracked a smile. "Let's just say you've missed a lot being cooped up here for so long."

She walked to the Fae who had spoken, reached out to him, and in the same moment, activated the Pillar of Eternity.

The Water Fae in front of her winked out of existence. The action was accompanied by gasps and even a few yells around the bath houses. "It's okay, he's fine," said Jak, holding aloft the Pillar of Space. "This is a Pillar of Eternity, it grants me the power to move any

person from one place to another. I have sent him to the nearby ocean.”

After everyone quieted down, Jak faced Nessa. “Would you like to go next?”

For once, the girl did not look scared anymore. Her eyes shone with eagerness. “Yes, please.”

Jak smiled and reached out a hand to touch the girl’s shoulder. In a flash, she was gone too.

One by one, Jak went to each of the Water Fae, sending them through space to instantly appear not too far away in the nearby ocean.

Finally, only she and Naem were left. She turned to face him. “You ready?”

“As ready as I can be for this,” he said, bracing himself as Jak grabbed his shoulder and instantly appeared at the beach in the blink of an eye.

A small crowd had gathered there, people they had recruited from all over the city since arriving. There were Watchers Naem had worked with, there were villagers who had survived the demon invasion, and of course the Water Fae splashing around with some vigor in the nearby water. Semwei stood at one edge of the crowd with a handful of Gifter students. Jak caught her eye and smiled at seeing the stern but kind headmistress again. Hopefully they’d get a chance to catch up soon.

A figure turned to face her and Naem upon their arrival. Jak smiled as she stepped forward to embrace her husband. Seph was a preacher, but one that actually seemed to have a lot of truth to what he taught. He was the first to recognize Jak’s full potential, and to advocate for Illadar, though at the time he hadn’t known exactly what Illadar would become. Now he was the love of her life.

They embraced, and Seph held her tightly. “I knew you would be here soon once the Water Fae started appearing.”

“They’re all here,” she said into his ear as they held each other. “There’s even a serving girl who helped to keep them alive all this time.”

“And the queen?”

Jak broke the embrace and met Seph’s eyes, shaking her head. “She’s too far gone. Cain got to her.”

Seph hung his head, a look of conflict in his eyes. Jak let him have a moment, knowing what must be going through his mind. He was Queen Telma’s adopted son, and from what Jak knew, that relationship had never been a good one. And given the fact that Seph never talked about it, it was probably even worse than Jak knew.

“I’m sorry,” she said after a moment. “I know things were never

good between you, but...”

He shook his head. “I can’t be happy to see Cain’s grip on anyone, be they demon or someone like Telma. No one deserves that. But if anyone did...”

He left the phrase unsaid, and the implications surprised even Jak. Just how bad had his upbringing been?

“Is everyone ready?” she asked, changing the subject.

“I think so,” he said, turning back to look at everyone gathered along the beaches. “You know, I never had a congregation this large even when the city was packed with people.”

She winked at him. “Well when you factor in all the Fae, and the brands, and your prophecies, I guess I am kind of a big thing.”

He grinned, and Jak felt her heart flutter. “You don’t have to tell me twice. Not a day goes by that I’m not grateful that you love me, even when I’m nothing compared to...”

She shut him up with a kiss. They held it for several seconds. Not a passionate kiss, but a connection forged between them. When she broke, she said, “Don’t let anyone tell you that you are nothing compared to me. I would be lost without you.”

He pressed his lips together in a warm smile. “I love you.”

Jak wrapped her arms around him. “I love you too.” Then, after realizing that pretty much everyone was watching, she let him go. “I’m going to send you and Naem back first, so you can help everyone else when they arrive.”

Seph inclined his head, getting back to business. “Let’s do it.”

Jak turned to face the semi-large crowd of people that had gathered. “Everyone,” she said, wandering closer to the ocean so the Water Fae could hear her as well. “We’re about to go to Illadar. It is an entirely new planet, located on the opposite side of the sun from us. The demons have no place there, and it is a place of peace where humans and Fae live together in harmony. That being said, there are risks. For example, some of you may actually become Fae upon arriving there. We’ve found that the planet is full of magic, and that magic can sometimes instigate that transformation. So this will be your last chance to stay here if that’s what you want.”

No one moved, as Jak suspected they wouldn’t.

“Very well. This,” she held up the Pillar of Space for all to see, “will let me carry you there. It is a Pillar of Eternity and possesses magic greater than anything we have ever seen.” She sent a short glance at Seph, who nodded. Jak reached her hand forward and touched Seph’s chest, just as she activated the magic of the staff.

Seph disappeared instantly, as Jak mentally sent him away to Illadar. She turned and waved Naem over, who came without question and gave the crowd a brief wave before he too vanished.

“Just as you saw us arrive here just now,” Jak went on, “These two have just appeared on Illadar. They will help you find lodging and food when you get there. Now if you still wish to go, please come forward.”

Most of them crowded forward eagerly. Either they were all super supportive of her and the Fae, or they were simply too tired or scared to stay behind. In either choice, she was happy to help.

One by one, she began sending each one tens of thousands of miles away, all the way to Illadar on the other side of the sun. She nodded to Nessa who again seemed eager for another trip using the Pillar of Space. She saw Watchers, still with some of their armor, though far less polished and covered with dirt and dark stains that could have been blood. Semwei stepped forward, smiling and muttering a soft “I’m so proud of you, Jak,” before Jak returned the smile and sent her to Illadar as well.

Finally, all that were left were the Water Fae, still gathered in the nearby waters. Jak faced them. Since many of them were still far out in the water, she would try something else. Gathering her concentration, she honed and focused her mind to use the Pillar of Space in a way that stretched beyond what she could touch.

This took far more mental effort, and Jak could almost see complex math equations and other such manifestations of the magic she was employing. This was far easier when she had the other Pillar of Eternity as well, the Pillar of Time. When the two were combined, they appeared to have even greater magic. Before, she could open huge portals for people to just walk through, but now she had to reach out to each one individually. And doing so without physical touch was not easy.

Nevertheless, her mind found each of the Water Fae, and together in one massive burst of energy, all of them winked out of existence, at least on this planet.

Jak took a deep breath, feeling the fatigue in her bones. She would need maybe one or two more Strength or Sleeplessness brands to avoid such feelings. Though she would need some of the space on her skin for others plans. She could make do for now. Extra Healing and Toughness brands seemed to be good enough.

She stood alone now, with only the crashing of the waves on the sand as company. Looking up at the palace that towered high above her head, she gave a short wave to where the Royal Priest and the queen would likely be. Hopefully the Priest could find a solution to what was left of Skyecliff. They could only hope.

With that last thought, she took a deep breath and willed the Pillar of Space to take her home.

She blinked as she instantly arrived in a much brighter environment. It was mid-day on Illadar and the sun blanketed the field she stood in with a warm light. All around her stood people, most of them humans she had just brought here, but many were also Fae, welcoming the newcomers to Illadar.

Beyond them by several yards was a large lake, and from the lake came the sound of enthusiastic splashing. Jak worked her way past several people to get a good look at the Water Fae who were far more excited now that they were free and joined with their brothers and sisters in the water.

Jak wandered closer, coming to rest near the side of the lake, sitting, and wrapping her arms around her legs. It was essentially her universal signal.

And the signal was instantly received. Within seconds, Amelia, Jak's best friend in two worlds popped up in the water not far from where Jak sat. "You found them!" she said, enthusiastically, a huge smile on her face. "I mean...it's about time."

Jak snickered. "I'm sorry, I was too busy traveling literally beyond the sun to get them."

"Well you're, like, super powerful now, so I really can't be too impressed." But Amelia winked as she said it. If her friend had been on dry land, Jak would have rushed to her in a hug.

"You'll take care of them, right?" asked Jak. "Make sure they get up to speed on everything that's happened and get plenty of nourishment? They haven't had the best treatment, obviously, before now. They'll need a lot of food."

"Of course!" Amelia exclaimed. "And Skellig said we can start that expedition to reach the ocean soon. They arrived just at the right time."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Jak. "It sounds like you all have it figured out."

"Well of course we do," said Amelia with a wink. "Now did you see anything more of Cain?"

Jak shook her head. "Unfortunately no, there doesn't appear to be any sign of him anywhere, or the demons, or Marek. He's keeping low."

"Well that's a good thing, right?" said Amelia. "If he's not around, then he's not causing problems."

"I'm not so sure," said Jak. "He spent years planning before he ever showed his face. And it all would have worked out too, had it not been for me. If there's one virtue he has in abundance, it's patience. Which means the longer he waits, the more worried we should be."

"Well, you still have a lot of recruiting to do," said Amelia. "I'm sure you'll hear something about him sooner or later."

"Let's hope so," said Jak. "I just wish I knew more of what..." she broke off as she saw Amelia's face change. She was looking up at something above and beyond Jak.

"What is that?" said Amelia, squinting. Jak followed her gaze and shielded her eyes from the sun as she tried to see what Amelia was talking about. Immediately she caught sight of...something.

She squinted against the sun, which made it difficult to see, even with her Sightseer brand. But that didn't last long. Whatever that dark shape was, it approached at an incredible speed. It was large, and had wings, and...

Jak's eyes widened in shock. No.

"Everyone at the ready!" she screamed, launching herself into the air with her Telekinesis brand, and flying as fast as she could towards the approaching creature. She had to distract it, bring it away from the camp or they were all going to die.

The dragon loomed in front of her, its wings spread wide, and the sunlight gleaming off its impenetrable, scaly golden-orange hide.

It growled at her sudden approach and flapped its wings with a mighty gust of wind, almost hanging in the air. For a moment, they simply faced each other, and something passed between them, a sort of mutual respect, or an awareness that they were each facing a formidable enemy.

Unfortunately, even with all of Jak's power, she did not have the strength to take down this creature. With a roar, it lunged through the air and snapped its jaws at her. She dove out of the way, and watched as it forgot about her and continued its descent. Somehow it was ignoring her, even though it probably knew that she was the most powerful person on the planet right then.

She zoomed after it, landing on its back with an awkward clutching at its neck. It barely reacted, only rippling the muscles in its back like a horse shaking off a fly. Why was it so oblivious to her?

Trying something she had once seen Cain do, she put one hand on its body and sent a jolt of lightning into it, using her Thunder brand.

This time, the dragon did react, though not nearly in the same way that it had for Cain. It rumbled and immediately twisted in mid-air so it was gliding upside down. Jak immediately clutched its neck and called on her Telekinesis to keep her attached.

Had Cain sent the beast here? He must have, though she didn't know how it was possible. Perhaps Cain had some form of transportation that she did not know about, something that brought the dragon here almost as quickly as the Pillar of Space. Or maybe the dragon was simply more powerful than they realized, and arrived on its own power. Regardless, they finally knew what had happened to the beast, probably sent out by Cain even before her battle with him at Tradehall. But then, something about that didn't make sense either...

Another roar split the air. Now was not the time to speculate on how it got here. Right now, it was all about survival. She had to get him away from the camp. Off towards the mountains maybe. With a mental and physical heave, she put all her might into trying to turn the creature's head, like one would turn a horse.

With the combined power of her Strength brand, and her Telekinesis brand, she actually had some effect this time. Together she and the dragon began to bank to the right, heading more towards the mountains on that side than the actual camp.

But the monster was powerful, and it didn't take long before it put on two great bursts of speed. Its wings almost seemed unnecessary as the means to propel itself forward. Perhaps it had some other form of propulsion, though Jak could not see what that might be. It would make sense though, that the wings were more like tools for navigation than lift. It was far too big for the wings to actually hold it aloft on their own.

Now back on its previous course, the dragon opened its jaws and roared. Jak gripped her knees around the dragon's back so she could place her hands over her ears. The roar echoed through all the mountains in the distance, the sound of certain doom.

She tried again to divert its momentum with her magic. This time the dragon seemed to take notice of her, and it was not happy. With a suddenness Jak didn't think the dragon was capable of exhibiting, it spun in place, like a child's toy spinning around and around in the air.

Jak held on, gripping the dragon's neck with her knees, arms, and mental abilities, but it didn't last for long. Eventually her grip slipped and she flew through the air in some direction or another, she couldn't tell.

When she finally got her bearings and righted herself in mid-air, the dragon was already halfway between her and the ground, still roaring as it approached the camp.

Jak sped after it. At this range she could see others approaching and attacking the beast. Sky Fae were zipping around it, trying to confuse or irritate the dragon. Trolls and infantry were gathering in a line, and arrows raced into the air, pinging harmlessly off the dragon's scales. Jak frowned. Skellig knew better than to attack with arrows, she'd seen the dragon in Mt. Harafast.

Jak barreled into the flying creature just as it landed with a massive thud on the ground beneath it. Fae and humans continued to barrage it with their attacks, all of them useless. Flamedancer fire did nothing to its scaly hide, Telekinetics couldn't hold it, and Strongarms couldn't get close enough to do any good, though Jak had tried all those things and more, and none of them worked. That really only left them one choice.

"Run!" she yelled as she struggled to stay atop of the dragon as it, in turn, tried to fling her off its back by twisting and waving its head from side to side.

"Jak, close your eyes," came a voice she recognized. Yewin's voice. The leader of the Bright Elves.

Immediately she did as instructed, but through her eyelids a blinding flash of light still made her want to blink off the afterglow.

The dragon let out a sort of whining sound, like a dog's but much louder and greater. It swung its head from side to side, as though trying to regain its vision. Good, at least they had that to use against it.

"Run," Jak repeated. She couldn't see him at her angle, but presumed Yewin and possibly others were still standing there. "While it can't see you."

A violent whip of the dragon's head sent Jak flying. She landed hard on the soft earth, tumbling through a handful of brambles before coming to a stop. She needed the Pillar of Space. If she had that, she could climb on the dragon and use the staff's magic to whisk him away to somewhere, anywhere that wasn't here.

She was on her feet in an instant, ready to run for the Pillar as fast as she could, when she stopped in mid-track.

A single form was walking toward the dragon, who was still protesting from the flash of light Yewin had given it. The dragon towered over the small human form, and small jets of fire spurted in multiple directions as the monster blinked its eyes and tried to see.

She was close enough to see who it was. Immediately she started running towards him and the dragon.

"Seph!" she screamed at the man. Her husband had previously expressed a certain fascination with the creature, but now was definitely not the time to be taking risks. "Get away, it will kill you!"

Seph stopped, looking at her with an odd expression. Something

like confusion, or no, more like...amusement. "It's okay, Jak." he said, and there was not a hint of fear in his voice. "I think it's here for me."

Jak almost stopped running. How could it be there for Seph? Did it want him dead? But Jak thought back to the last time she and Seph had encountered the dragon on top of Mt. Knot. There had been a connection of sorts that Seph had made with the beast. He had somehow kept it from killing them, which had frustrated Cain at the time, who rode on top of the dragon's back much as Jak had recently done. Jak hadn't thought much of that moment when Seph had reached forth his hand and stopped the dragon from gushing fire onto the lot of them.

Just as he had in that moment, Seph put his hand out again as if to calm the creature down. Jak didn't know how a simple open hand would do any such thing, but to her astonishment, it was working. The dragon blinked several times at Seph, probably still recovering from the flash of Yewin's Fae magic. But its wings were no longer flapping wildly, and no more fire escaped its jaws. Instead, its eyes narrowed at Seph.

Jak continued her pace, and the dragon looked away from Seph to face her, its jaws opening with a growl that shook the ground beneath her. Seph put out another hand, this one intended for her. "Stay back, Jak. I've got this."

He's got this? They were literally within decapitation distance of the beast's jaws, not to mention its fire which could burn them to a cinder the moment it wanted to. Even Cain had not fully recovered from the effects of its dragon fire. Despite all of Cain's Healing brands, his skin had never fully healed, and Jak suspected the same would happen to her if the dragon were to attack directly.

But she listened to Seph. After all, whatever he was doing appeared to be working. Jak glanced at the nearby trees, some of them smoldering slightly from the spray dragon fire, and saw several of the others peeking out from behind them, watching what Seph would do next.

Seph took several steps closer, so his face and that of the dragon were mere feet from each other. His hand was still outstretched, and with a boldness that took even Jak by surprise, he placed it on the tip of the dragon's snout.

No one breathed, not even the dragon. Seph walked closer, taking his other hand to cradle the dragon's muzzle. He laughed softly. "He...he doesn't want to hurt you," Seph said, looking like he might burst with a mixture of excitement and adrenaline. "I was right, he came here for me."

"How is that possible?" asked Jak, staring in awe at the beast. When calm, there really was something majestic about it.

"I...can't explain it," said Seph. "But I can communicate with it."

"Seph," Jak stared at her husband, a new realization dawning on her. They had talked about this before, but it had been more of a joke. "Do you think you might be some kind of Fae?"

"I don't know," he said. "We know that two races are meant to govern life. We already have the Nature Fae who clearly have stewardship over plant life, but...maybe you're right." He turned back to the dragon, whose eyes were half closed in an almost pleasant expression. Seph rubbed its snout and the eyes closed even further.

"Can you tell it to...not attack us?" Jak asked, hesitantly.

"It doesn't want to, it only came here for me, and only attacked because you attacked him first. I'm trying to explain that you're all my friends and that..." he trailed off and looked at the dragon. At the same moment, the dragon's eyes opened wide once more.

"What is it?" Jak asked, unconsciously adopting a combat stance.

"I don't know," said Seph. "There's something else. I'm trying to communicate but it feels like there's a wall there, something I need to break past. Perhaps if I..." he moved past the dragon's jaws, running his hands along its scales until he reached the base of the neck where it met the beast's chest.

Suddenly, something beat within the dragon, lighting up a portion of the chest. Jak narrowed her eyes, but made no sudden moves. Was that the dragon's...heart?

The light came again, accompanied by an even stronger pulse. Jak could make out veins silhouetted against the light of the creature's heart, it had to be a heart. Seph kept his hands on that region, not appearing scared or startled in the slightest.

A third time came the heartbeat, and this time Seph said something, "Oh, so that's what..."

But before he could say what it was, his hands disappeared. At first, Jak thought she was seeing things, but a moment later, she realized Seph's hands were literally embedded inside the dragon's flesh.

"Seph!" she yelled, and moved forward again. The dragon roared, but not in pain. It was a roar of triumph, of majesty. What was going on?

Before Jak could move any closer, Seph's arms and chest moved through the dragon's hide, swallowed up by some kind of magic Jak did not know. In mere seconds, he was completely gone, entirely consumed inside the dragon's flesh.

“Seph!” she screamed this time, her voice high pitched and

frantic. “Seph, come back!” She prepped a fireball, though she knew it was useless. Yet she hurled it at the dragon with all the strength she could muster. It dissolved into nothing over the dragon’s hide, who gave no heed to it, other than to direct its eyes at Jak. “Give him back!” she screamed.

In answer, the dragon leapt into the air, twirling and spreading its wings in a move that would have awed Jak had she not been worried for Seph. The dragon was taking him away from her. If he was even alive. For a second, panic gripped her heart. No, he had to be alive, she could not bear it if he were dead. But it had looked like the dragon had...eaten him somehow, though not with its jaws. Did all dragons have that kind of power? It wasn’t like they were common enough to know everything there was to know about them.

The beast roared, the sound filling the entire clearing and the mountains beyond. Once again, the roar was triumphant, almost regal. It was a roar of confidence and joy that Jak did not share.

She jumped and called on her Telekinesis to send her upward.

With a burst of energy she slammed into the belly of the beast. Her teeth rattled as the impact did next to nothing to the dragon, instead sending a shockwave through her Toughness-enhanced bones.

Once again, she tried a trick she had seen Cain perform. She pressed both her palms down against the dragon’s scales and activated her Thunder brand. Instantly, white-hot power shot out of her hands and into the dragon.

The dragon only flinched.

She tried again, and this time the beast rolled in the air, and its tail flicked towards Jak as if to lazily brush her off. Jak flew out of reach just in time. Her Thunder wasn’t doing anything to the dragon. When Cain had done it, he had caused visible pain in the creature. Perhaps Jak needed more Thunder brands to make the effects powerful enough.

She flew in closer again. She couldn’t concentrate enough to brand

herself while in mid-air. And the dragon was flying away from the ground. If she were to land, she might not catch up with it later. And she would not let it escape. Not when Seph...

There was only one option. She flew under one of its beating wings and circled around until she was practically on top of it. Soon she clung to its back, letting go of her Telekinesis, and feeling its great shape rise and fall beneath her with each flap of its massive leathery wings. Could she even focus enough to give herself an extra Thunder brand with the constant motion of the dragon? She would have to take that risk.

Doing her best to tune out the rushing wind and the feeling in her stomach as she rose and fell on the creature's back, she closed her eyes, clutched one arm with another, and pictured the Thunder brand in her mind. Slowly she felt the slight pain of the brand lines forming in an open space on her arm.

It was working. The brand was settling in, and she was having a much easier time concentrating than she thought she would. She barely noticed the up and down motion of being on the dragon's back, and the rushing of air seemed more like a pleasant breeze. Even the hard and cold dragon scales beneath her body felt softer, warmer. In that moment, everything was calm and serene, and it remained that way as the brand settled into her skin, and Jak felt a well of power expand within her. Now she might be able to hurt the dragon, and if not, she could just repeat what she had just done until she had enough Thunder brands to...

"You're not planning on using that against me, are you?" said a voice.

Jak's eyes snapped open, blinking in the sunlight. Her eyes shot in the direction of the voice, directly in front of her.

The dragon was gone.

Instead, her body was pressed against a human figure, the two of them flying through the air, locked together in an embrace Jak had not even noticed as she had given herself the Thunder brand. But as she caught the person's face, she didn't even bother to wonder what had happened to the dragon.

"Seph!" she cried, and wrapped her arms tightly around the preacher's warm body. Extremely warm, she realized. Almost hot to the touch. Only then did she notice the chill around her body and she looked down towards the ground. They had to be at least several thousand feet in the air. And it was freezing up here.

But none of that mattered. Seph was alive! "I told you it would be okay," he said before smiling at her, melting her fears away. But with that came questions.

"What just happened? And where is the dragon?"

"I'm not sure I understand it completely myself," he said, as they continued gliding through the air at a leisurely pace.

Hang on. Jak wasn't using Telekinesis, so how were they flying right now? She looked into Seph's eyes and saw something there, something new. A fire. A confidence that hadn't been there before.

"You're flying!" she said, realization dawning.

He grinned again. That same, dazzling grin that she had come to love over the last few years since they'd met. Yes, it was him. But there was something different this time.

"Yes, I guess I am," he said after taking a moment to let the realization sink into her.

"Seph, you better start explaining." Jak said, her voice growing stern.

He laughed. Actually laughed. Did he have any idea the trauma he had just put her through? She had thought he was lost.

"Well I can say this much," he began. "I think I might be the last species of Fae. Last for now at least."

Jak slowly nodded, and brushed a strand of hair out of her face. She could feel the temperature rising. Seph was guiding them back to the ground, it seemed. "That makes sense," she said. And it did. New Fae seemed to pop up every other week these days. Though what Seph had said...

"What makes you think you're the last?" she asked.

"A guess," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "We know that there will be twelve races on Illadar, including humans. If I'm a new type of Fae, that would make me the eleventh race. Yet from what I can tell, the last race will not appear until another great time of crisis."

"Well then that's not important right now," said Jak, suppressing a slight shiver as the air warmed around her, and she basked in the heat radiating off of Seph's skin. "So are you the dragon then?" The question sounded absurd, even as she said it. But where else had the dragon gone? She had seen it swallow up Seph, and yet now it was nowhere to be seen, replaced by her husband, who could now fly.

Seph took one hand off her waist so he could stare at it. To Jak's eyes it still seemed completely human, though there was perhaps a slight radiance to it, a healthy warmth to the skin that hadn't been there before. "I think so," he said. "When I touched the dragon before, the connection we shared seemed to grow exponentially, until I found myself feeling what it felt, and thinking its thoughts."

"It sort of swallowed you," said Jak. "Through its belly."

"Really?" asked Seph, as though he hadn't been there. "I guess that explains why you were so distraught after we took flight. But I needed to stretch my wings and feel the power that was suddenly mine. You can't know how empty I was before, how incomplete."

"You never said you were incomplete before?"

"I never knew it until now. But this..." he stared at his hand, then down at his body. "This is what it feels like to be whole."

"Could you change back into the dragon if you wanted to?" she asked. "Or are you some kind of dragon-human now?"

He laughed again, and this time Jak thought she caught a hint of the dragon's roar coming from deep in his belly. "I suspect both," he said. "Though we can work out the details of what I can do later. We're almost back at the camp."

Jak followed his gaze downward to see that he was right. Beneath them she could make out all the hastily constructed huts and tents near the mountains. She could even see Skellig from where she stood, a glint of light shining off of the woman's armor and sword.

Neither she nor Seph spoke as they finished their descent. Jak chose instead to simply enjoy pressing herself against Seph's body, and watched as they descended below the mountains, below the treeline, and finally alighting on the ground besides a large group of confused onlookers.

Skellig approached them both with her sword still out. "What happened up there?" she asked immediately. She met Jak's eyes. "We saw you race after the dragon but eventually you were too high up for us to see what was happening."

"So..." Jak glanced at Seph, trying to figure out a good way to explain. Seph only shrugged. "Long story short..." she began slowly. "It would appear that when the dragon swallowed Seph up before, that was actually the two of them becoming one and merging somehow."

"What do you mean?" Skellig eyed Seph warily, and Jak couldn't help but narrow her eyes as she spotted the warrior tighten her grip on her sword.

"He's not a threat," said Jak, putting out an arm to signal Skellig to stand down. Though with her next thought, she turned back to Seph and gave him a look that asked, 'are you?'

"The dragon was never here to hurt any of us," said Seph, folding his arms confidently. "It only came here because it was drawn to me. And the moment it arrived I was drawn to it. We merged as I believe we were meant to do all along."

"So what, you and the dragon are somehow sharing a body now?" Skellig looked like she had a headache.

"More like we are the same body that was once fragmented and is now whole." Seph replied. "I believe I am a new species of Fae."

"A Dragon Fae?" Jak turned to see Yewin drawing closer. He was staring in awe at Seph. As were several others who had gathered. Naem, Perchel, and almost everyone else on the council. Jak followed

their gaze to stare at Seph as well. Was it just her or did her husband look a little taller? Maybe it was just the way he held himself.

"I'm...hesitant to call myself a Dragon Fae," Seph said. "I do not think the others of my kind will all become one with dragons as I have. For one, we only know of this one dragon, and I imagine there will be far more of my race of Fae than there are dragons to merge with."

"You think others will merge with other animals?" Jak asked. It was an interesting idea. What would they learn about the animal kingdom just from the experiences of such Fae?

"That would be my guess," said Seph. "Now that I've transformed, I suspect it won't be long until more show up."

"There aren't any other animals on Illadar," said Skellig. "Not yet anyway."

"Something we must correct," Seph replied.

"Well 'Animal Fae' doesn't exactly roll off the tongue," said the diminutive gnome, Girwirt from Jak's feet. She hadn't even noticed him arrive.

Seph thought it through. "That is true, Girwirt. And since I'm the first and currently only member of my race, I guess that gives me free reign to take whatever name I want." He raised both hands out and above his head. "Call us, Shifters."

With that, his arms elongated and grew far larger and filled with muscles. Seph's spine exploded outward, tearing the shirt he had been wearing. Jak stared in awe, but couldn't help wonder why Seph's clothes hadn't torn before. Maybe it was something to do with the way he had merged with the dragon the first time.

Her thoughts were cut off by a triumphant roar coming from a dragon's head newly formed in place of Seph's. Giant wings exploded out of Seph's back, providing the finishing touch. A fully-grown orange-scaled dragon stood on all fours in front of them. Skellig and many of the others backed away, their hands on their weapons. But as the dragon met Jak's eyes, she knew there was nothing to fear. Her husband was in those eyes. Her husband *was* those eyes.

Yewin and surprisingly Girwirt had also remained in place, staring up at the dragon with awed expressions. Seph roared at the sky, a sound that shook their little clearing, and rattled nearby trees.

Preachers. Most of them did have a flair for the dramatic.

The dragon, or rather Seph, put one giant paw forward, its eyes meeting Jak's as it bowed low. He was inviting her to climb onto his back.

Without hesitation, she moved closer, feeling the dragon's warmth, Seph's warmth as she touched his scales. Those scales had felt cold to her before. Now, they were something else.

“Jak,” said Skellig. “Are you sure?”

Jak turned to face the major. “I’ve never been so sure about anything in my life.”

Skellig cracked a smile. “I suppose you would know best. Come talk to me when you get back. There are some matters I wish to discuss with you and the council.”

Jak nodded before placing one foot on the base of Seph’s massive leg, and scrambling up his side until she sat perched between the joints of his wings.

Seph lurched into the sky, the wings beating with a force that nearly toppled those below. In fact, it did knock a few over, including a grumbling Girwirt.

But soon, everyone below them disappeared as Seph flew into the sky at an astonishing speed. Jak had to use what Strength she received from her brands just to hang onto her shifter-husband’s back. Shifters. That was a good name. If all others Fae like Seph could transform from human to animal at will, it seemed a more descriptive designation than something like ‘Animal Fae.’

Jak felt a slight chill as they rose higher into the sky, but she ignored it. Seph’s scales were warm beneath her touch, keeping her from feeling cold in the slightest.

They soared above the mountains, above a thin scattering of clouds. The air was thin up here, but the view was incredible. Jak strained her neck trying to get a good look in every direction. The mountains ran east to west all around them, great white peaks for miles and miles. Off to the south she could just make out what had to be the southern coast, far enough away that the haze almost obscured it completely, but it couldn’t be more than a week’s march on foot. That’s where Amelia and the other Water Fae would be heading soon.

To the north, she could see a winding river cutting through the mountains, like a snake navigating large trenches created by its path. That area was well defensible. Perhaps they could set up a fort or city there, though Jak could only hope the need for defense of that kind would be minimal here on Illadar.

The chill air rushed past her, flinging her hair backward as Seph continued flying to the east. Jak raised herself a little higher on his back, so that more of the wind pushed against her body. She had flown before, but this was something else, this was exhilarating in a way she had never experienced. She was not only flying, but she was flying on the back of a dragon, who also happened to be her favorite person in two worlds, her husband.

“I love you,” she whispered under her breath, nestling herself back onto her husband’s scales, pressing her cheek against the warmth. She was sure Seph couldn’t hear her above the rushing of the air, but all

the same, he roared into the sky, as they continued to fly.

When at last she and Seph returned to the camp, the sun was

setting in the west. They had spent the day together, mostly playing around, even going so far as to throw fireballs at distant mountain peaks to see who had the most range and power. Seph won of course. No one could match dragon fire.

Then they had stopped near that winding river Jak had spied earlier, and Seph changed back into his human self. They had spent the rest of the day in each other's arms, with Seph's warmth protecting her from the chill of the mountains.

But the best moments could not last forever, no matter how much Jak wanted them to. Skellig seemed to instinctively know that they had returned, for she immediately met Jak in the small clearing and asked that she follow her into the cave where they were temporarily headquartered. Seph followed her and Jak inside.

"We've seen some minor unrest since you left," Skellig said, once the three of them had sat down at a stone table that had been recently erected inside.

Jak felt a small part of her wither inside. They had only just managed to patch things up between Fae and humans since Vander's uprising. What could be the problem now?

"Is it the Shadow Elves?" she asked, her voice betraying the exasperation she felt.

"Actually no, the relationship between humans and Fae have been far more reasonable than I would have expected," said Skellig. "Especially since you returned from Tradehall with your powers intact. I think none of them plan to underestimate you again."

Jak's face flushed. "So what is the problem then?" she said, trying to shift the conversation away from her.

"Well, as per your orders, Naem has been distributing some of the passive brands to as many as are willing. Many of our human soldiers are now equipped with Healing, Toughness, Sleeplessness, and Hungerless. It's caused quite a boon to moral, not to mention the capabilities of our armies."

“But...” prodded Seph. He still stood, with his arms folded, that quiet confidence still present.

“But,” Skellig went on. “There is a group, a sizeable one, that does not want any additional brands, or any brands for that matter.”

Jak sat back in her chair. “Well that’s fine. I never said it was mandatory, only that Naem and I would be willing to distribute the passive brands to whomever wanted it.”

“Yes, I know,” clarified Skellig. “But unfortunately, there are many who think these ‘Brandless’ as they’re now called, are being selfish.”

Jak narrowed her eyes in confusion. “How so?”

“Well, everyone knows that your conflict with Cain and the demons is not over. They’re expecting a battle, and many believe that only with the help of Fae powers and extra brands, will we be able to put up a significant fight. The accusers believe the Brandless are weakening our odds in that fight, and that their choices might get someone killed.”

Seph frowned, and Jak’s emotions inwardly mirrored his response. “We can’t exactly force anyone to take a brand,” she said after a moment.

“I know that,” said Skellig, clearly agreeing with Jak. “I’m only telling you what has been going on around camp. I can reason with people all I want, but it’s hard to sway the opinions of seven thousand people, not to mention the Fae themselves.”

“Don’t tell me the Fae agree that these...Brandless,” Seph rolled the word off his tongue with some effort, like it tasted foul. “Are selfish for not taking a brand.”

“Some do, some don’t.” Skellig shrugged. “It’s become a matter of some debate in the camp. Some believe we should require branding to ensure the safety of all, while others believe that we shouldn’t force anyone to do anything.”

Seph looked at Jak. “I would strongly advise against forcing a brand. After all, I never had one.”

“Do you think not having a brand was necessary for your transformation?” Jak said, meeting his fiery eyes.

He hesitated. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Most of the other Fae had brands before they transformed,” added Skellig.

“Yes, but we can’t let our past experiences with some Fae dictate what we know about others,” said Jak, still holding Seph’s gaze.

“Of course,” said Skellig. “I just thought you should be aware.”

Jak turned back to the major. “I’ll talk to as many as I can, tell them that everyone deserves the right to choose whether to take a brand or not, regardless of the danger we face.”

“And you’re sure that’s the right decision?” Skellig cocked an

eyebrow at her.

"Of course," said Jak, though she tilted her head at Skellig. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"It's nothing," said Skellig, putting up her palms. "I agree we can't force people. Though I can see the logic in making sure this army is as prepared as possible for whatever comes."

Jak nodded. "Let's just hope it won't come to all out war like that. We don't even know where Cain is or what he's doing."

"Yes," Skellig tapped her chin with one finger. "And that's what frightens me."

Jak continued, "I'll stay here for a time, to help Naem brand as many people as want it. But there's still work to be done back on Earth."

Skellig nodded, "Of course. We've already seen to the needs of the Water Fae you brought back with you. More victories like that will do wonders for morale."

It was also the right thing to be doing. Jak hoped Skellig remembered that. The woman thought too much like a tactician at times.

"Very good," was all she said. "And what about our other little project?"

Skellig nodded, glancing up at the cave walls. "I've had the gnomes and dwarves working on it. Naem has helped too, though we will need your help if your idea is to work."

Jak followed Skellig's gaze to see a few sheets of metal lining the cave walls. Hopefully they would serve Jak as she intended. She looked back at Skellig. "Make sure no one else knows the specifics of what we're doing. I'm sure some will figure it out, but I don't want any chance of word getting out, not when we don't know what Cain is up to, or who he's in contact with."

Skellig gave her a curt nod. "Of course."

With that, Jak stood. "I will help Naem give out more brands then. And I'll make sure to talk to each person about these so-called Brandless."

"I would appreciate that," said Skellig, also standing.

With a brief look at Seph, and grabbing his hand to pull him along with her, Jak exited the cave back into the clearing. Jak marveled at the sunset as she emerged. The view was stunning, with a giant lake on their left, and a towering forest on their right. The place looked nothing like it had when they first arrived. Back then, it had been nothing but rock and snow. What a difference the Fae had made, especially once the Nature Fae appeared and began cultivating the plant life here.

She glanced at Seph. What kind of a difference would his kind

make? Would these woods be full of animal life, or Fae shifters, in the near future?

“I don’t like this talk of Brandless,” said Seph, mistaking her questioning look for concern.

“I don’t either,” she responded. “But Skellig said it was just a bit of unrest. I’ll try to talk people down. Besides, the number of people who don’t want a brand can’t be that large of a group. Surely people won’t care if only a handful refuse a brand.”

But it wasn't only a handful. Over the next few days, Jak learned

that nearly a thousand of their original seven thousand were refusing brands. Most of them were part of the Triad's company, those from the southern, northern, and eastern kingdoms back on Earth. Those cultures had not grown up with brands like Jak's had, many of them not even knowing about the magic until recently. Though there were a few others who had once been part of Seph's original congregation in Skyecliff, and they were following their leader's initiative. They seemed to think not taking a brand was some kind of noble thing to do, that it would lead to becoming a Shifter as had happened to Seph.

Jak spent most of her hours giving out brands with Naem. They had several Gifters among the company who helped with those receiving their first brand, but since only Orens could give out second or third brands, it fell to Jak and Naem to brand everyone else. At least they had help with those first brands. Jak didn't want to think about how tired she would be if she had an additional six thousand brands to perform.

As it was, the process was slow. And for that reason, no one did more than grumble about the Brandless, since everyone was still waiting to receive their own. Jak and Naem could only get through five or six hundred in a day before becoming too tired to continue on. Jak found herself sleeping every night, even with the assistance of her Sleeplessness brand. Sure, it only took three or four hours to fully refresh herself, after which she could go back to branding. But it was long work.

Seph was the talk of the camp, and when he wasn't spending time with her, he was flying around the area, usually at the request of someone who wanted to see his transformation. Jak didn't mind this. It was the greatest reminder that maybe taking a brand wasn't the right thing to do. It provided hope for the Brandless, and evidence to their critics that good things could come from not taking a brand. At least, that's what they thought. It was still unclear if Seph's transformation would or would not have been possible had he been

wearing a brand.

Regardless, she used it as her primary example whenever she got the chance. Thankfully, many agreed with her, though many others didn't.

"I don't see the point," said Nolan, a Watcher who had come with them from Skyecliff. "I mean, why wouldn't you want to have extra brands. To not have to sleep and eat as often, or worry about an infection." The man was holding out his arm for Jak to brand with Healing. The Watcher's original brand was Strength, a common brand for soldiers.

Jak activated her Gifter brand as she responded. "It doesn't have to make sense. The point is they don't want to, and it's not our place to force them."

"Well then someone should talk some sense into them," replied Nolan. "Or they're going to get themselves and maybe their friends killed. I'm sure with the proper convincing, they'll come around."

"Perhaps so," said Jak, knowing her arguments were not going to work on this man, though he did seem somewhat more nonchalant about it compared to some of the others. She'd met some that adamantly refused to believe that anything other than branding the Brandless was a solution. At least Nolan thought talking to them was an option.

"Good luck with that," said Naem. Her friend stood several paces away, holding the arm of another man, this one with dark skin characteristic of those from the southern nations. From what Jak could tell, Naem was also handing out a Healing brand. "The more we brand, the more people realize how great it is to have this many brands." He held up his own arm as an example. It now held several brands, though not as many as Jak had, including a recent Gifter brand which had just faded from blazing white to black as he finished giving out the Healing brand.

"We can't exactly ask someone to do something they have chosen not to do." Jak retorted. "That goes against everything Illadar stands for. We came here for peace, to get away from culture-driven mandates, not to create our own."

"And yet, some rules must be in place, for our own safety." Naem shot back. "You know, to prevent things like killing, or stealing."

"Well, yes, but..." Jak hesitated. She knew certain laws were necessary but only now had it become apparent to her that they were essentially starting a new nation here on Illadar, a new government. And currently there were no official mandates for the things Naem mentioned. No way to discern between right and wrong, legally at least. But people could get by on common sense for now, right?

Nolan shifted his feet, looking from Jak to Naem. Jak wiped away

her hesitation with a quick breath, and stood a little straighter. It wouldn't do for the soldiers to see her waver. She had to put on an air of strength and stability, something they could count on until this whole business with Cain was over, assuming they all survived to tell about it. Yes, once Cain was defeated, then she could think of laws and courts, and everything that went with that. Or at least she could let people like Skellig and Yewin come up with things like that. She was no ruler after all.

"You're all set to go," said Jak, giving Nolan a slight slap on the area where the new brand lay. Nolan winced, as the site of a fresh brand was usually somewhat tender. But it was a Healing brand so he would get over it soon. "Come back after your rotation and we can give you more."

They had set up a pretty effective system to go about the branding. The first rule was that each person could only receive one brand at a time before returning to the back of the queue. This ensured that as many as possible received at least one brand before acquiring more.

The other Gifters of their camp gave the first brand, then they were sent to either Jak or Naem. Together they managed a lot, though it was tiring work. Jak had been at it for several hours already today, and she was already growing weary. Perhaps now would be a good chance to rest.

She walked by one of the Bright Fae who kept the records on who was receiving each brand, and put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm going to take a small break. I'll be back in an hour."

"A break?" Naem called after her. "You already had one of those today."

"I have a few things to take care of."

"Alright, but if you ask me it looks like you're just trying to get more rest than me."

"No one is stopping you from taking breaks too, Naem." Jak called back, stepping away from their station and not looking back.

"Uh yeah, other than all these people asking for brands."

Jak smiled and shook her head slightly. Judging by his tone, Naem wasn't really upset. He would get over it. Besides, she really did have a few things to do before returning to continue her work.

She proceeded around beyond the camp on the west side, heading around a large foothill until she came to a stop just beyond. There, several cheery dwarf faces, and a few gnomes as well, beamed back at her.

"Mistress Jak," said a voice. It was Noralim, the current leader of the dwarves. "We've been waiting for you."

"What have you got for me, Noralim?"

"We're nearly finished," he said, waving her over to observe his

handywork. “We have several metal sheets here ready for your inspection and branding.”

Jak followed Noralim past a few of the others until she reached the metal sheets he spoke of. They lay on the ground in front of her, in perfect rectangles.

She picked one up, audibly remarking on how light it felt. They were beautifully crafted, long and thin sheets of the purest copper, a lucky find in this part of the mountain. So far, only she and the council knew what she was doing with them, although maybe some of the gnome and dwarf workers could have figured it out by now.

“Do you have enough metal to finish the job?” she asked Noralim and she hefted the metal sheet in her hands.

“More than enough, Mistress Jak. There’s plenty of copper, and we can sense more deeper within the mountain.”

“Very good,” said Jak. “I’ll take these and brand them. Then I’ll leave them in the cave for you to finish your work.”

“Yes, Mistress Jak.”

Jak hoisted what sheets she could carry and proceeded back towards the camp, specifically to the cave where she could brand the metal in relative secrecy. She didn’t want too many people to know her plans. They were a long shot, and she didn’t need anyone getting their hopes up, or somehow leaking the word out to Cain, even though that was unlikely at this point, at least while they remained here on Illadar. But she couldn’t afford the slightest chance of her plan failing, if it was going to work at all.

When she arrived back at the cave, she set the metal sheets down. Light as they were, and given her Strength brands, she had no trouble getting them there. Though had she lacked her Strength brands, she would probably be in rough shape right now.

Next, she set to work branding the metal sheets, and further branding herself. She let the cavern remain dark, trusting on what little light trickled through the entrance to give her just the amount she needed to work. That should help keep any stray onlookers from figuring out what she was doing, or what brands she was using.

When she was done, she carefully set the metal sheets in a corner. Girwirt and his gnomes would pick them up later, to perform the next step.

She returned to rejoin Naem in continuing to give out brands. Unfortunately, her “rest” had not exactly been all that restful, so she found herself as tired as Naem looked. They could only continue branding for about another hour before both of them lost the energy to continue further. Once again Jak felt the pull of sleep. Perhaps she could do with more Sleeplessness brands, though Yewin had warned her that sleep was still an important thing, even if someone with

Sleeplessness needed less of it.

So she settled down for the night, returning to a makeshift house made from stone near the cave. It was one of the largest, and even though Jak had protested taking such a generous space, the people, particularly the Shadow Elves, had insisted she take it.

Seph was already there, sitting on a stone stool in the corner, reading the Book of Illadar again.

“Do you ever read anything else?” she asked, tossing off her cloak as she entered the room.

Seph snapped the book shut and shot to his feet. “It’s not like we have very many options,” he said in a jubilant voice. Setting the book down, he took two large steps to close the distance between them, grabbed her by the waist, and pulled her into a long kiss.

When they parted, Jak’s cheeks radiated, and it wasn’t just because Seph now put out a much stronger warmth than a normal person. “I like that,” she said abruptly.

“Oh yeah?” said Seph with a sly grin. “I can keep going if you want.”

“Hm, I wouldn’t say no to that,” said Jak, grinning back.



A WHILE later they lay in bed, Jak’s eyes facing upward at the stone ceiling, and Seph all but purring next to her. He was different now, more confident, and she liked that about his new changes. Hopefully that wasn’t the only part of his personality that had changed.

Regardless, his newfound abilities as a dragon shifter were invaluable. The dragon had almost defeated Cain once, long before Seph had merged with the beast. Perhaps now they could stand a chance against him. But before they could do that, they would have to find the demon king.

“We’ll need to go back soon,” said Jak.

Seph turned on his side till he was facing her. “I know. I’m assuming I’m invited again?”

She smiled. “I mean, I guess we could use you.”

They grinned, and he kissed her lightly, his hot breath running over her face and neck.

She held Seph’s face in her hand, her expression sobering. “We have to find Cain.”

“I’m happy to help,” Seph said immediately. “If anyone can stand up to him, I can.”

“I know, and that’s what scares me,” Jak admitted. “Before now, the dragon was the only one who came close to killing Cain, but you

remember what happened?"

"What?"

"Cain won. And he eventually dominated the dragon."

"Not for long," said Seph. "I was able to snap him out of it, remember. And I get the feeling that, mentally at least, possibly physically, we're a lot stronger together, him and I."

"I thought you said you were the same now, not two people?"

"Well, I am. I'm just trying to make the process a little easier to understand."

"In any case, I don't want you to take on Cain alone. I want to be there."

"I can agree to that. But I can cover as much or maybe more ground than you can. Let me help you find him. I'd be the worst at recruiting."

Jak laughed softly, picturing the chaos that would ensue if common village folk saw Seph's transformation into a dragon. "You're right, best if you leave that to me and the others."

"When do you want to set out?" he asked after a brief pause.

"In a few days. I have some more preparations to make before we go."

"Your little project in the caves?"

Jak nodded, "and handing out the extra brands."

"Any luck handling those who want to force the Brandless?"

Jak shrugged. "I honestly haven't encountered very many. Most seem mildly upset by it, but not in a way that could become a problem."

"Good," Seph shifted position again so he was lying on his back. "The last thing I want to encourage is their right to choose such things."

Jak agreed, though she was troubled. She let herself listen to Seph's breathing for a few moments before saying more. "You know, at some point someone is going to have to make those decisions."

"What decisions?"

"Well things like that, like who gets the right to choices in certain things, especially if the choices could be dangerous."

"I hardly think refusing to take a brand counts as..."

"I mean more problematic things. There's the obvious like punishing crimes like murder or theft. But what about more gray areas?"

"Like taking a brand?"

"Well maybe, though I agree with you on that. But..." she thought about it for a second. "We know education is important, right? I was lucky I had a knowledgeable father, but not everyone is so lucky. Do we force people to get an education just because we know it's good for

them? And what if they don't want it. Is that dangerous? And then there's everything from selecting teachers to deciding what should or shouldn't be taught. I mean, who can we trust to make the right decisions on those things?"

Seph turned to face her again and put one hand to her face. It emanated warmth that seemed to fill her. "We'll figure all of that out later. Right now, you're in charge, and therefore you make those decisions."

"But I'm hardly qualified to..."

"So in the future you find others who are more qualified, and let them decide. Seek out the experts. Like the council you already formed."

Jak let that sink in. Seph was right in part. The council had already been a great help to her leadership. She was hardly good enough to guide all these people on her own.

"I guess you're right," she said, calming down a little. She nuzzled her nose in his chest. "You're always right."

He laughed softly. "Wouldn't that be nice."

Jak spent the next few days continuing her somewhat monotonous work. She spent most of the day giving out brands, though the demand was starting to die down. Most of those who wanted a brand had one, and many had three or four. They only had maybe a thousand more brands to give out before they reached the end of their quota. That only left the Brandless, which meant Jak and Naem's work would soon be over, at least among those of their camp.

When she wasn't branding the people of their camp, Jak spent the rest of her time either with Seph or working on her little side project, which she continued to keep secret from everyone who didn't need to know. Even the council only understood the basics of what she was doing.

But after four more days of work, she knew she had had enough. The unending strain of branding hour after hour was getting to her. She needed to do something else, especially knowing that Cain was still out there somewhere. For all she knew, he could have made his move on Earth by now. And if anyone remained alive, it was her duty to find them, and save them from the demon king's influence.

And so, after a final night of sleep, she spent the next day gathering as many as were willing to help in her efforts on Earth. Mostly she sought for the Sky Fae, who could move quickly and made excellent scouts. She would need them to cover the most ground, and possibly locate Cain's whereabouts as well.

Secondly, she was joined by about a hundred of the previously branded soldiers, under Skellig's command. The general was also going with her to help establish a military presence back on Earth. If they were to defeat Cain, they would need an army, and just about everyone preferred to take the fight to Earth, rather than risk this beautiful new world they had colonized.

Lastly, Seph, Viona, and a few more of the Shadow Elves agreed to come. Li and two more Nature Fae also came, though Li said most of them would be needed on Illadar, to keep cultivating the planet. Jak agreed.

Once Jak knew who all was coming, she helped them prepare, and by the next morning, they were all ready to depart.

"I still don't see why I can't go," said Naem as Jak strapped on her travel armor. She didn't need it for protection anymore, but there was still something comforting about the tight-fitting leather and cloak.

"I told you, you're needed here to finish branding anyone who's left," Jak shot back.

"But I know people there. People I recruited already who couldn't come immediately, or who saw me recruiting."

"I'm sure we'll find them," said Jak.

Naem scowled at her. "I liked you better when you were less composed."

"That's very backwards of you."

"You see? That's what I'm talking about. The old you would have had nothing to say to that, you would have sputtered for a while, and I would have just come with you like I said I would."

Jak leveled her eyes at him. "Well then it's a good thing that's not what's happening, isn't it?"

Naem shook his head at the ground, but Jak detected a faint smile. When he looked back up he said, "Be careful out there."

"We will," said Seph, coming up behind Jak and placing one hand on her shoulder.

Naem exchanged a slight nod with the dragon shifter before returning to the camp.

Jak turned to see the large team she had recruited. Almost a hundred and fifty all together, mostly made up of branded humans and Sky Fae, though there were others as well. She strode forward to pick up the staff that lay against the nearest tree. It gleamed in the morning light, the Pillar of Space, a bright white stave with black runes running up and down its length.

Holding the Pillar and facing the army, she felt the need for a speech, yet in that moment nothing came to her. They all knew what they were facing, and what was at stake. They all knew that if they encountered Cain, they could even lose their lives.

"Are you ready?" was all she said.

A wave of nods and straightening spines were her response. She took a moment to catch the eye of Skellig, who smiled and inclined her head with all the rest. Jak returned the gesture.

Turning away from them, with Seph at her side, she called on the Pillar of Space and activated its magic. The others gathered together so each of them were touching each other, which would make it easier for Jak to transport them all together. Jak closed her eyes, readying herself for the slight strain that was about to come.

Seph put his hand on her shoulder, indicating that the rest of them

were ready.

Without opening her eyes, she used the Pillar of Space and bridged the gap between worlds, folding space until she and all who were connected to her emerged on the other side.

She opened her eyes, swaying slightly.

If it weren't for the fact that it was nighttime on this part of Earth, or that the environment looked completely different, she wouldn't have thought she had traveled a mile, to say nothing of traveling between planets.

They were in Riverbrook, or rather the plains alongside her hometown. It was often where she appeared when traveling back to Earth, probably due to her connection with the place. But as a horrifying stench reached her nostrils, she realized she'd rather be anywhere else.

The smell wafted over the plains, rising from the rotting corpses of several thousand demons, killed by her own hand several months earlier. The mutilated humans smelled bad enough when alive, but when dead their putrid flesh became a haven for flies and maggots. Even though the demons had died a long time ago now, and the corpses were nothing but rotting bones and rags, the odor had not fully dissipated yet. Jak wondered if it ever would.

Thankfully, they weren't too close to the scene of the battle. Instead, she had brought them closer to the river. Skellig met her eyes, connected to all of her soldiers. Sky Fae were flying above, their small bodies and agile forms easily darting around those of the humans.

Skellig spoke first, holding her nose like many of the others chose to do, "I had no idea it would be this bad after so long."

"The effects of bloodshed and carnage are not easily forgotten," said Jak with her lips pressed. She had been responsible for the deaths of all those demons. And even though they attacked her people, and were nothing but mindless slaves to Cain's will, she couldn't help but feel some responsibility for their fate. If only they had had the manpower at the time to bury all of them.

Shaking her head to break herself out of her trance, Jak got down to business. "This is only a temporary stop. I wanted a more familiar place to bridge the gap between worlds. But now that we're here, I can take each of you wherever you'd like to go. Perchel, I think you and the Sky Fae should split up to cover as much ground as possible. If you divide everyone into groups of three or four, I can send you to key areas around the nation. Your primary goals are to search for signs of Cain or his demons, as well as recruitment of any who wish to join us on Illadar."

"Do you think people will listen to us?" Perchel replied from where he hovered about a foot above their heads.

Jak inclined her head. "Given what is essentially an economic collapse in both Skyecliff and Tradehall, I'm sure many will be feeling the effects, even in the small villages. And the Sky Fae are a little more..." she searched for a good word, "divine in appearance. I have a feeling many will see your arrival as a sign. And I will visit each group periodically if there is any trouble."

Perchel rose a little higher. "We are ready upon your command."

Jak acknowledged him with a slight nod before turning to Skellig. "I think you should go to Foothold."

Skellig blinked at her. She hadn't discussed this with the major yet. "I had thought about visiting the stronghold."

"There may still be Watchers there for all I know. And it's the last major fortress left in the kingdom that hasn't been overrun by Cain and his demons, at least last I checked."

Skellig appeared to agree. "So you think it could be vulnerable to attack."

Jak nodded. "Assuming Cain intends to overthrow the nation's military power entirely. He already left Skyecliff and Tradehall in ruins. And it seems like as good a place as any to establish a military presence."

The corners of Skellig's lips turned down slightly, and she adjusted her weight on her feet. "I don't know. The place is defensible, but there never was the best escape route out of there."

"We have no need of an escape route with this," said Jak, raising the Pillar in her hands.

That seemed to satisfy Skellig. "Very well. I'll take my men to Foothold and the surrounding area."

"Very good," said Jak. She grimaced at her own formal tone. When had she become so...stiff. Maybe it had something to do with all the soldiers who were watching. She didn't want to let them see her less rational side. "I'll follow you through at first to make sure there's no immediate danger."

Without waiting for a reply, she turned to Seph who stood next to her. He had said nothing since arriving. "Are you coming with me?"

Seph grimaced slightly. "Now that I'm here, I believe there is something I must do. I may be gone for a little while, but I can promise to meet you in Foothold eventually."

Jak tilted her head. "What is it you need to do?"

"I'm still unsure, but I have a hunch. Best not to mention it yet, but it could be important."

Jak grabbed his shoulders, trying to put as much affection into the gesture as she could without alienating the soldiers. "I trust you. Do what you need to do."

Seph flashed that smile of his at her. "Thank you, my love. You

might want to stand back a bit.”

“Give Seph some room,” Jak raised her voice at the others.

The others obeyed, giving Seph a wide berth. Then with a final smile at Jak, Seph’s body began to change. Like before, it started with his arms and legs, which elongated and bulged with muscles until they were the proper size. His body grew as well, and his face lengthened into the long snout of the dragon. Two wings burst from his back, and soon they were facing the fully-sized dragon.

Jak watched as it leapt into the air and flew away north. The rest of the group seemed suspended as they also watched him go.

Finally, Jak turned back to Perchel and asked, “Are the Sky Fae ready?”

“We await your command,” said Perchel with a nod and a flutter.

Jak cracked an appreciative smile, “Then I won’t keep you waiting.”

She walked to each of the groups of Sky Fae that had formed, and placed a hand on each of them before calling once again on the power of her Pillar of Eternity. She sent them to Skyecliff, Tradehall, the north borders, and other key areas along the mountain range. Jak faced Perchel one last time. “Stay out of trouble. I’ll visit each location shortly to see if there’s anything to report. If you don’t hear from me, head to Foothold.”

“I will,” said Perchel, before Jak rested a hand on his shoulder and sent him and two of his comrades away. When that was done, she faced Skellig. “I’m ready to take the rest of us to Foothold now.”

Skellig nodded. “We are also ready.”

“Then gather together,” said Jak. They all obliged, placing hands on each other’s shoulders as Jak readied herself. Together, they left Jak’s hometown and arrived in the next breath near a large tower, surrounded by a stone wall and moat, the fortress of Foothold.

In a sense, Jak had just mirrored her first journey following the death of her father. Back then she had left Riverbrook and eventually ended up at Foothold, where she had her first taste of a true battle. And here she was again, leading more troops. What would her father say if he could see her now?

Jak scanned the area. It was quiet, but she thought she could see smoke coming from the chimney of a nearby farmhouse. There were people here, and she could make out no sign of any danger.

She breathed in a breath of fresh air. Yes, this place was in far better shape than the plains of Riverbrook that they had just left. Skellig and the others would be safe for the moment.

Skellig stepped beside her. “No sign of trouble.” It was a statement not a question.

Jak nodded. “I’ll leave you all here for now, but I’ll be back soon.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’m checking on Skyecliff first, to see what has happened to the Royal Priest and Queen Telma, or any other stragglers left in the city.”

“Very well,” Skellig took a step forward, towards the fortress. “We will see who is left in Foothold and take command if possible. Should there be any problems...” she looked at Jak for guidance.

“I’ll be back soon,” Jak confirmed. “But each of your men and women have multiple brands. I’m sure you’ll be able to handle yourselves until I return.”

“It’s not just about their physical prowess.” Skellig clarified, pulling closer to speak to Jak in a lower tone. “You inspire them, and others too. If the people of Foothold don’t accept me, they will remember you.”

Jak put an arm on Skellig’s shoulder appreciatively, though she had to reach upward to do so, as Jak was a lot shorter than the woman. Even though she literally looked up to Skellig, who would have thought that Skellig would figuratively look up to her? “I’ll be there soon,” she confirmed. “Just try to keep anyone from causing any messes.”

“That much I’m sure I can do.” Skellig remarked in a stronger tone.

“I’ll see you soon,” Jak called out before calling on the Pillar of Space and vanishing.

She found herself in the dark, empty streets of Skyecliff. The small amount of cheer she had felt when talking to Skellig suddenly escaped her. There was nothing to be cheerful about here. A city that had once bustled with life was now empty.

Homes lay in ruins, some of them from fires, others from what appeared to be demon claws. Carts and wagons lay abandoned in the streets, some of them accompanied by the bones of unfortunate cart-horses. Human skeletons were visible here and there as well, hiding beneath the weeds growing through the cobblestones and around the houses and shops.

She activated her Telekinesis brand to raise herself into the air, getting a good look at the place. The moon was out, but it was still hard to see. She would have to wait a while until the sun rose.

Thinking quickly, she sent a jet of fire into the air, making it white hot enough that it illuminated much of the city. That would draw people close, hopefully, assuming anyone was left.

It was time to check on the Royal Priest and the queen. Using her powers of flight to cover more ground, she raced towards the towering peninsula that held the Royal Palace and Cathedral. This time, rather than go through the main doors, she swung around to the balcony that belonged to the queen.

Everything was just so quiet. She could hear only the sound of the wind rushing through her ears. No bird sang, no other animals rustled through the bushes. There weren't even any demons to break the silence. Where were they and their master?

Jak alighted on the balcony, and immediately heard something, a startled gasp.

Her eyes sought out the sound and spied the Royal Priest, looking pale and thin as always, though perhaps more sunken in his eyes.

"She's gone," he said, turning his face away from Jak.

"What do you mean?" Jak asked.

"I went to scrounge up some breakfast," the Royal Priest continued, "And when I returned, she was no longer in her bed." He

sniffed. "I assume she jumped off the balcony, though I couldn't see a body from here."

"When was this?"

"Yesterday morning."

Jak sighed. If only she had come here sooner. She stepped over to the balcony and looked down. Waves crashed against the shoreline below. She would see nothing from this height in the darkness. Instead she turned back to the Royal Priest.

"I saw nothing of Cain or demons, if that's what you're going to ask next," said the Priest. His voice was low and sorrowful. Almost monotone. "And there was no other way she could have gone. I searched the whole palace and the outer doors were still locked."

"What about the secret passage in the kitchens?" He shook his head. "Also locked. She could not have secured them from the other side. There was only one escape for her." He stared again at the balcony's edge.

Jak swallowed. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm...fine," he said, though he didn't look it. "I've just been sitting here. Contemplating..." he stopped there. Jak swallowed again. Had the Royal Priest been considering throwing himself off the balcony as well?

"You're not safe here," she said.

"I can manage."

But Jak shook her head. She wasn't having that. If the queen had committed suicide, she would not let the Priest follow in her footsteps.

"I'm sorry, but I cannot allow you to stay." Without another word she closed the distance between them so she could grab hold of his tunic before activating the Pillar of Space and sending him to Illadar.

She stood alone in the darkened private chambers of Queen Telma. Yewin would know what to do with the Royal Priest. He would help.

Flying back out of the balcony, Jak lowered herself until she was level with the rocks below. Just as the Royal Priest had said, there was no sign of the queen's body. Had she jumped, it could have been swept away by the high tide. But there was no way to tell. Jak spent the next few minutes searching for any evidence, even a scrap of clothing. But she found nothing. The last ruler of Skyecliff was gone. It seemed the last nail in the coffin for what had once been a great city.

A sudden wave of anger swept through her. Cain was responsible for this, the entire downfall of a major civilization. Jak had rescued many from this place and others from Tradehall and elsewhere, but none of that would have been necessary had it not been for the demon king.

Knitting her brow, she sped back to the place where she had previously lit her beacon. No one was there, not a soul had seen her

flame. There was nothing left for her here.

With an audible shout, she used the Pillar of Space to take her away.

This time she arrived in Tradehall, another dead city. She knew for a fact that it was completely empty by now, having saved the last remaining refugees just a few months previously. But that was not why she was here. This had been the last place where she had seen her enemy.

“Where are you, Cain!?” she yelled into the night. Only the sound of her own voice replied, fading into the distance.

She sped through every passage of the city, tearing through ruined buildings, and even searching through every room in the wooden palace at the center of the city where Cain had made his home. But the demon king was not there, and nothing but the bones of his dead demons remained.

With a growl of frustration, Jak used her magic again. She didn’t care where she went. She would hunt Cain down if she had to travel all across the world to find him. He could not hide from her, not when she had the Pillar of Space on her side. She could get anywhere. And she would find him eventually. It was only a matter of time.



SHE SEARCHED MT. HARAFAST, Mt. Knot, and just about every place she could think of. She checked in on Perchel and his scouts, but found none of them had anything useful to report.

Maybe Cain was no longer in the kingdom at all. He had the Pillar of Time, which meant he could potentially move out of danger in an instant. He could easily elude even the keen eyes of the Sky Fae. Though he couldn’t also hide all his demons. So where were they?

The Sky Fae did have some good news though. Their recruiting efforts were going better than expected. Each town they visited had essentially erupted into chaos, and most were eager for some good news. When the Sky Fae visited and offered them a place of peace, and a chance of a good life on Illadar, most of them agreed without question.

Two of the Fae did have a report Jak found even more interesting. Two of the villages they visited had mentioned the death of their local Gifter. Gifters weren’t as common in small towns, but a few usually had at least one in residence. And yet they seemed to be disappearing.

It was the first clue Jak had that Cain might still be in the area. He wasn’t particularly fond of Gifters, since they were the key to empowering the people. Some, like Jak, could be potential Orens. And

so by eliminating Gifters, Cain removed his chances of competition. If Jak found any Gifters still alive, she would have to send them to Illadar immediately, for their own safety. But so far, she had found none.

After several long days of searching, and periodically checking up on Perchel and his scouts, Jak went back to Foothold. It had been several days since her last meal, and even with Hungerless, she was starting to feel the need for nourishment.

To her knowledge, Skellig had found some Watchers at the fortress, and they were so scattered and cut off from knowledge of the outside world that it hadn't taken much effort for Skellig to take command. Technically, Skellig had been relieved of duty from the Watchers, though few of the troops in Foothold knew about that, and those that did generally kept quiet when they realized that Skellig and all she brought with her had multiple brands and yet somehow were not demons.

Jak chose to appear outside the fortress rather than inside. The guardians of the place would probably want to feel as if they had some control to let her in, rather than her just popping up wherever she felt like it. She owed them that much.

Walking towards the drawbridge, she paused to take in the land around her. Something felt...off about it. And a sinking feeling spoiled her gut. She narrowed her eyes as she looked around. It felt too much like the feeling she had when Cain was near. Had he been around Foothold this entire time?

Turning back to the fortress, she squared her shoulders. Hopefully nothing had happened since she last checked in with Skellig. She strode to the edge of the road, which dropped off into the moat below. The drawbridge was raised all of the time, out of principle at this point. Not that it would do much good against enemies like Cain. But it might keep a few demons out at least.

Someone was watching. Jak heard shouts from the wall as someone spotted her lone form walking towards the fortress. Jak allowed a slight smile as the drawbridge began to lower. The last time she had tried to get the Watchers to lower the drawbridge she had pleaded and begged to no avail. Now all she had to do was draw near and she was allowed in. So much had changed.

The drawbridge landed with a thud, only inches away from Jak's feet. She took a step forward and strode across the entrance to Foothold. She had so many important memories here. She had killed Kuldain, fought off a demon army, even snuck in with Naem to rescue her mother, barely escaping with the help of Marek.

Jak let her gaze stray towards the mountains. She hoped Marek was alright. Though he had seemingly betrayed her to Cain by taking

her powers away, he had also been the instrument of regaining those powers. He had proven that he wasn't just some mindless demon with no choice but to obey Cain. He had become Cain's trusted confidant, true. And that meant he was now one of the greatest assets they had to take down the demon king. Assuming they could find each other. What was Marek up to?

Skellig met her at the gate. "Any news?"

Jak shook her head. "The queen has vanished, possibly killed herself. I sent the Royal Priest back to Illadar. But the Sky Fae have found nothing."

"Well," said Skellig, with a grim smile. "We may have found something."

Jak leaned in. Finally something to go on. "What is it?"

Skellig turned and waved Jak to walk alongside her. "There have been mild reports of demons in the mountains. Only glimpses. Several people in a village just east of here have seen them moving up and down the slopes."

Jak started, "That's not far from where I was first taken by demons, over two years ago."

Skellig nodded, "I know. I'm beginning to wonder if that's not a coincidence."

Of course! Jak wanted to hit herself for not seeing it sooner. When she had first been in this area, she and the Watchers had been attacked by demons. But rather than killing Jak, they had dragged her off, taking her up the side of the mountain. She had only escaped thanks to the aid of the Shadow Elves.

"If I recall," continued Skellig. "Kuldain even mentioned that those demons were taking you to see their master. Perhaps he has some kind of hideout in the mountains."

Yes, it all made sense. "They are called the Hollow Peaks for a reason." Jak confirmed, wringing her hands together and feeling excitement bubble up in her stomach.

"We were hoping you could bring us more of the Shadow Elves," said Skellig. "Their expertise with these mountains would be appreciated."

Jak nodded eagerly. "Of course. I have them combing the area around Mt. Harafast for recruits. But it makes sense to bring them here."

"Good," said Skellig, looking satisfied. "That will help. Also I think it's about time we brought in more of our army from Illadar."

Jak considered that. "You think there will be a battle?"

"Inevitably," Skellig said. "And since we've had reports of some demons in this area and nowhere else—" She gave Jak a long look for confirmation that she hadn't found anything. Jak nodded. "—then it's

likely that we will see combat soon, and it will be here. Foothold is the last bastion of defense against Cain in this region. I expect it won't be long."

Jak nodded to herself. Skellig was making a lot of sense. "Very well, I will bring as many as I can."

Skellig stepped forward and put a hand on Jak's shoulder. "You're doing a lot, how are you holding up?"

"I'll be fine," said Jak, resisting the urge to shrug off Skellig's hand. "We'll all rest once Cain is defeated."

Skellig looked uncomfortable, like she had something more to say. But in the end, she dropped her arm to her side. "Very well. Bring me the Shadow Elves and the rest of the armies, and we'll be well on our way to mounting a proper defense."

"How have the local Watchers received you?" Jak asked.

"There have been few problems," Skellig said with a wave of her hand. "Honestly, most were happy to receive help, given what they've heard about what happened at Tradehall and Skyecliff. Some of the stories are far worse than the reality."

"I can imagine," said Jak.

"Though a few have been a little wary of us, seeing as we have multiple brands. Under normal circumstances we all would have been burned at the stake for heresy. Now..."

Jak nodded. Now people understood it was possible, and most had probably heard of the girl with multiple brands. She had been the first to sport them, and now she was also the one giving them out.

She grasped Skellig's arm with her own. "I'll be back as soon as I can with those reinforcements."

"Thank you, Jak."

Jak readied the Pillar of Space, preparing it to take her away towards Mt. Harafast. She would pick up the Shadow Elves first, then head back to Illadar.

"Oh, and Jak." Skellig said hastily before she could leave. Jak turned to face the major. There was some discomfort in Skellig's face. "Uh...it will probably be best to leave the Brandless behind."

The muscles in Jak's face tightened a bit. "Of course," she said, but she didn't like it. However, it made sense. Though many of the Brandless could fight, they would be at a serious disadvantage compared to all of the others. Besides, someone would have to stay behind.

It didn't take her long to round up Viona and the rest of the Shadow Elves. Most were excited when she told them they were going back to the Hollow Peaks.

"If Cain had a hideout in those mountains, none of us ever discovered it," said Viona. "But we will happily search for it. No one knows those mountains better than us."

Jak was only too happy to have their help. It could be dangerous, with demons in those mountains. But there was no getting around danger these days. The Shadow Elves knew what they were getting into. Perhaps Cain didn't have a hideout in the Hollow Peaks, or perhaps he had concealed it all this time. But they would look for it, and they would search for all of time if they had to. Perhaps Jak could give them a hand using the Pillar of Space to get to places they might not have usually explored.

But she had more business to conduct before that was ready. With a burst of magic, she sent herself straight back to Illadar.

When she told them that Skellig was ready for their help, almost everyone was eager to join. Naem was especially excited. He had been continuing his work of handing out the passive brands to all who asked for one, and his work was all but complete.

"Just give me a spear, and I'll take out every last demon myself," he said with unbridled enthusiasm.

Jak couldn't help but smile at her old friend's eagerness to help. But she wasn't smiling when it came time to tell the Brandless that they had to stay behind.

"We're not useless," said one. "It's not like we spent all our lives farming or herding sheep. Most of us are warriors like you."

"I know," said Jak, putting out both her hands as if to say that she understood. "But Foothold will be overcrowded as it is. We have to prioritize those who will have the best chance of surviving. And that, unfortunately, means you get left behind. Someone has to keep a watch on this place."

"For what, the nonexistent predators? For the crops? Everything's

perfect here, and the Nature Fae have control of the crops. Everything will be fine.”

“There was that time with the dragon,” said a woman next to the man.

“That was a special circumstance,” he said with a dismissive wave of his hand. That was true, though Jak didn’t bother to agree with the man right now.

“I’m taking the Nature Fae with me,” said Jak. “And we still don’t know what this world could throw at us. Look, I’d love to take you with me as well, but we simply won’t have the space for you. Would you choose I select a thousand of the branded to stay, when they could have a much easier time remaining alive during a demon attack?”

The man opened his mouth as if to say yes. But he closed it again. Even they had to admit that they were much easier to kill than the others. It still made logical sense, even though most of them, including Jak, were not happy with the situation.

“I suppose we can wait,” he nearly spat after a moment to contemplate.

Jak breathed a sigh of relief. At least that was taken care of for now.

She let them be, choosing instead to walk through the ranks of those *with* brands, watching as they prepared themselves to travel.

“Jak,” She turned to see Naman and Jamilla approach her from behind. They were both among the branded, with several brands running up and down their arms. Each had a pack on their back and looked ready to go. They must have been among the first to get ready.

“Have you heard anything about our son?” asked Jamilla as she drew closer.

Jak shook her head. “Marek hasn’t been seen, and neither has Cain. But we spotted several demons going up and down the Hollow Peaks. He might be close.”

“We’d love to help you find him if we can,” said Naman. He looked less anxious than his wife, but Jak could tell they were both ready for action.

“I can have you go with some of the Shadow Elves up into the mountains,” she offered. The army wouldn’t miss two of its own. “I’m sure they would welcome help.”

“We would appreciate that,” Jamilla confirmed.

“But if you do find Cain,” Jak cautioned. “Or Marek, it will be dangerous. You cannot confront Cain or do anything to let him know you are near. Even if that means keeping yourself hidden from Marek.”

Jamilla hesitated, but Naman nodded. “We won’t do anything

foolish.”

“Good,” said Jak.



SEVERAL HOURS LATER, the armies were ready to move out. There were approximately six thousand of them, including the Fae who had agreed to go. Most of the gnomes, dwarves, Ice Fae, and Nature Fae agreed that they were needed in the fight against Cain and his demons. Even Amelia and the Water Fae wanted to send someone. Jak was secretly glad of this. Water Fae would be invaluable in keeping their defense. If they could use their magic on the moat and nearby river, it would take a lot for the demons to even get close.

Only the Brandless remained behind. And from the many comments Jak had received since making the announcement that they couldn't come, she knew they were not happy about it. But there was little to be done. They had to stay and that was final. This way, they had a much higher chance of remaining alive.

Naem sidled up beside her. “Everyone is ready.”

Jak took a deep breath. Moving this many people would be hard. She needed the Pillar of Time working together with the Pillar of Space to create portals. Without it, she would have to transport each person using direct magic. She could do it, and it might even be faster than walking through the portals. But it would take a toll.

“Tell everyone to link arms,” she said. “Everyone has to touch each other, or they will get left behind.”

Naem obeyed, and began running down the line, shouting the orders as he went.

It took a while for six thousand men, women, and Fae to follow suit. But as the orders passed around, and word spread throughout the army, everyone began to link arms and form a giant chain. Within a few minutes, everyone was facing her again, a giant sea of people staring at her for guidance.

Jak swallowed. It was an interesting feeling, seeing everyone look to her in that way.

Naem returned to her side. “They're ready.”

Jak nodded, “Okay, then let's do this.”

She grabbed Naem's arm, and the two of them walked forward until Naem could hook his other arm around the nearest soldier.

In her spare arm, Jak held the Pillar of Space. Its power thrummed beneath her fingers as she called it forth. This was going to be bigger than anything she had done since creating Illadar in the first place.

She closed her eyes and concentrated, taking a deep breath. There

were so many people, and she could feel them all, connected like a web of living, breathing creatures. She brought the magic to bear. It resisted. There were too many people. The effort of transporting this many could kill her, or render her unconscious.

Yet she did not back down. She willed the magic to life, wielding a greater portion than she had ever asked of the Pillar of Space. It could not do as much as it could together with the Pillar of Time. But it could do enough.

Light blazed around them, and all six thousand soldiers and Fae suddenly left their place on Illadar, and reappeared moments later on a large plain on Earth, just outside of Foothold.

Immediately, Jak's muscles failed her. She collapsed to the ground and felt the Pillar slip from her fingers.

Naem quickly stooped to slow her fall. He checked her pulse and placed her head gently against a bed of tall grass. "Are you okay?" he asked, concern in his eyes.

Of course she was okay. She was clearly staring at him with her eyes wide open, and all it would take to tell him that was to open her mouth and...

She blinked, the light faded, and she tumbled into unconsciousness.



WHEN SHE BLINKED AGAIN, it was to a warm light of a fireplace.

"She's coming around," said a voice. It sounded like Naem again.

A face appeared in her vision, partially blocking out the light. She recognized the short hair and towering demeanor, though from this angle she looked even taller. It was Skellig.

"What happened?" she said. Her voice sounded fainter than it should.

"You fell unconscious," said Skellig, though there was a smile on her face. "Apparently you're not as invulnerable as you seem to think."

Jak pushed herself up onto her elbows, looking around the room. Skellig stood next to her, and Naem, Viona, and several others watched from nearby. She recognized the room as the same quarters where she had recovered years earlier after her fight with Kuldain. They were back in Foothold.

"Did everyone make it?" she asked, groggily.

Naem nodded. "Everyone is here," he said. "You did it, Jak."

"We've been helping them get settled," said Skellig. "The Nature Fae have agreed to help us grow food for everyone. But we've run into

other problems.”

“Like what?”

“Well, we’ve discovered more demons. To the west. We didn’t notice them at first because there are no towns out that way, and we didn’t send scouts or recruiters in that direction.”

“How many?”

Skellig exchanged a glance with Naem. “We think...all of them. They’ve been standing there for the last few days.”

“Few days? How long was I out?”

“Three days.”

Jak nearly shot out of her bed. Three days? She had a Sleeplessness brand, she shouldn’t ever need that much sleep. The effort of using the Pillar of Space must have worn her out more than she thought.

A sudden dizziness overtook her, as she tried to rise too fast.

“Hold up there,” said Naem, reaching forward to push her back down. “Your brands will help, but give them a moment to kick in.”

Jak glanced at his hands holding her shoulders, and he quickly retreated. Sometimes Naem forgot that they weren’t on close terms anymore. Allies, yes. Even friends. But as much as he seemed to want it, even now, they were never going to be more than that. Which reminded her...

“Has anyone seen Seph?” she asked.

Skellig shook her head. “I haven’t heard from him since we arrived.”

A bubble of worry burst in her stomach. He would be okay. She would just keep telling herself that. If anything, he was off completing some kind of spiritual adventure out there. You never could tell with Seph. But right then, in that moment, she wished he was there with her. She needed his company, his comforting touch.

“I’m sure he’ll be fine,” said Naem with a light shrug, sounding like he was trying to make everyone feel better. “After all, he’s probably the most powerful of all of us now, the lucky dragon.”

Instead of making Jak feel better, his remarks caused another wave of unpleasantness to roll through her stomach. Was Naem jealous of Seph or was he...

The sick feeling in her stomach only intensified. That was odd, was she getting sick or...

Jak’s eyes widened in shock. Despite Naem’s protests and her dizzy head, she whipped out of bed and began flinging her travel cloak over her head. “Cain is coming!” was the only explanation she gave as she pulled her straps tight.

At her words, Skellig immediately turned pale and raced out the door, barking orders. Naem was also pale but he remained where he was. “He has the Pillar of Time,” he said, solemnly. Jak met his eyes

and pressed her lips together. Naem was the only one besides her that truly understood what the Pillars could do. “What are you going to do?”

Jak pulled a strap tight on her wrist guards. “If he has broken the Pillar, enough to use it, we can’t assume it will prevent him from killing as it did me. But he might have a hard time of it. Thankfully, with everyone branded with Toughness and Healing, we might stand a chance.”

“But why now? Why didn’t he attack us before?” Jak shook her head. “I don’t know. Maybe because I was incapacitated. Maybe he thinks I still am.”

Naem strode to the corner of the room and picked up a long object resting there. Jak could see what it was when he turned back. It was the Pillar of Space.

“You dropped this after bringing all of us here,” he said, taking a few steps closer.

Jak took the Pillar out of his hands. “We still have some advantages Cain cannot hope to fathom or wield.”

Naem nodded. “Do what you do.”

Jak exited the doorway to find near chaos in the square beyond.

Hundreds of soldiers were scrambling to get ready, and from what she could tell, many more were on the walls, bumping into each other to find a position. Through it all she could see Skellig shouting orders, throwing her hands up in exasperation as she wasn't immediately obeyed.

Jak swallowed. Perhaps they had spent so much time obsessing over branding that they had forgotten about basic combat training. Though she couldn't really blame anybody, Skellig least of all. It's not as though they had had much time.

With a small burst of her power, Jak propelled herself upward than forward towards the wall. She could still feel that unease in her stomach, growing in intensity, the signal that Cain was on his way, and fast. Very fast, in fact. He might already be using the Pillar of Time.

Jak held the Pillar of Space at the ready as she stepped gracefully on the forward facing wall.

"Demons, sir," said a soldier beside her, his face a mixture of fear from the situation and relief at seeing her.

Jak narrowed her eyes, bringing her Sightseer brand to her aid. Yes, the man was right. In the distance, a shadow covered the Earth. A mass of demons coming from their west side. Thousands of them. No, hundreds of thousands. As she peered closer, it only seemed to get larger and larger. This had to be literally every demon ever made.

Broken brands. Cain, on his own, they could maybe deal with. But with this many demons, her entire army would be occupied. If Cain also joined the fight, she would have to put up with him alone, and that was something she wasn't certain she could do.

"Remember the plan," said Skellig from behind her. Jak glanced back at her. The woman had moved fast. "Get him to talk."

Jak nodded and turned back to face the demon army. She would need no spear or sword. No such weapon would do any good against Cain. Besides, she was a weapon far superior to anything that could be

made. Jak's brow furrowed as she prepared herself for an attack. Cain was coming ahead of the army, and he was coming swiftly.

That feeling of slight nausea in her stomach was only getting stro...

Jak gasped as a fountain of pain split through the arm holding the Pillar of Space. For a moment frozen in time, she stared at it, seeing a blade going through the flesh and muscle and bones. Yet even as it did so, the torn flesh began to knit back together. As the sword passed through her arm, it healed itself just as fast. Her extra Healing brands had seen to that.

In that split second, she saw a flash of something else, a pair of icy blue eyes embedded in a horrific face of drooping skin and covered in brands. Cain was finally here.

Jak thought she caught a hint of a frustrated growl before the demon king had disappeared. Jak whipped around and opened her mouth to warn the others, but just then the man behind her flew through the air, his head severed from his neck in a clean stroke. Both head and body flew into the soldier behind him.

For a moment, she panicked. How could she go up against someone who could move in the blink of an eye? Clearly her enemy had the use of the Pillar of Time, and even she couldn't stand against magic of that power.

Something seemed to pulse in her hand, and she looked down to see the Pillar of Space, its runes fluctuating slightly. It must be reacting to the magic of its partner.

Another soldier flew backwards, similarly dismembered, then another and another. Cain was destroying her army one by one before any of them could react. Few had more than one Healing brand, and that wasn't going to do any good against dismemberment.

Moving the Pillar of Space almost as if it had a will of its own and was guiding her, she tapped it on the ground, activated its magic, and sent herself through space to appear instantly just a few yards away, right into the path of a phantom sword that was about to cut its way through another of Jak's warriors. She brought up the staff, its polished metal able to withstand all but dragon fire, and caught the sword on its length.

For just a moment, a form materialized in front of her. Cain bore the sword in one hand, and in the other was the Pillar of Time, a polished black staff, the inverse image of the Pillar of Space. His face was haggard, he bore no shirt, and his flesh glistened with fresh sweat.

Had the situation been different Jak might have smiled. Cain was tired. She had never seen him sweat before in her life. It had to be the Pillar he wielded. The power of time took effort to use, and Jak often

found it draining her of energy before, much as the Pillar of Space had done when she took her armies from Illadar to Earth. Perhaps for Cain, that effort had to be increased.

She knew it had resisted his attempts at bending it to his will. Perhaps it did so still, fighting him and draining his energy faster than it had for Jak. Or perhaps it was the fact that Cain was killing people using its power. It hadn't liked that when Jak had tried to do the same, even when killing demons. It had brought on a nausea whenever she tried to use it as a weapon. In the end, she had surrendered to its wishes, using the Pillars only for the betterment of her people, and not for death.

But Cain was killing, and if Jak knew anything, she knew the Pillar would not be pleased.

"You look tired, Cain," she said, keeping every ounce of fear out of her voice. She would never again address this man as if he were her better.

Cain didn't respond. Jak's last view of him was a sweaty, measured scowl before he disappeared and Jak felt a rush of air as his form sped past, towards the soldiers behind her. Cain was moving fast, but not nearly as fast as Jak had personally experienced with the Pillar. Perhaps that was another side effect of Cain using the Pillar in a way it did not want to be used. It didn't respond to him as it had to her. He wasn't as fast.

But he was still dangerous, far more dangerous than any army of demons. And he would keep attacking unless she did something about it.

Again, almost instinctively, the Pillar of Space activated and transported her just feet away from her original position. She raised the Pillar and once again caught Cain's sword just inches away from a would-be victim. The soldier, a man Jak didn't recognize, widened his eyes and broke out of his rank.

Cain moved again, and again the Pillar seemed to act as though it had a mind of its own. Jak appeared just in time to block his next attack, and his next. Cain changed direction, this time he did not attack a soldier, but sped through the air towards the top of the tower.

Jak called on the magic of the Pillar of Space, allowing it to take her there. The staff responded as commanded, eager to help her stop its partner from doing Cain's bidding.

"You move fast, Jak," said Cain as they faced each other on the top of Foothold's signature tower.

"My Pillar doesn't like what you're doing," she replied.

Cain eyed the Pillar hungrily, causing Jak to tighten her grip. If she somehow lost possession of her Pillar, it would mean the end for her. Cain would easily best anyone who stood in his way with the help of

both Pillars.

"I will have that one soon," he said. "It's only a matter of time."

With his last word, he vanished as he sped towards her with unmeasurable speed.

But Jak was ready for him. Already she had constructed a wall of Telekinetic energy. She felt something press against it, then retreat, then press again harder.

Not wanting to push her luck, Jak used her own Pillar to transport her to the other side of the tower platform.

"You can't take me for such a fool that you think simple tricks like that will help you," she said, keeping the calm in her voice.

Cain appeared across from her. "I will kill you."

Okay, he was talking. That was good, she had to keep him visible. "We hold all the advantages," she said, peering closely at his brand-covered body. He had multiple brands on his face, though no duplicates of the same brands that she could see. Perhaps that's why she hadn't noticed until recently that he had multiple copies of the same brand. The rest were hidden on his body.

"Ha!" he laughed, "All you have is the Pillar of Space, you have no idea the assets I have at my disposal, what my parents brought with them from the stars."

"I'm sure it's fascinating. But..." she couldn't tell him about Seph yet. That was their greatest asset, and one that he didn't know about. She just had to stall. "The Pillar of Space holds more power than you think."

"So it does," said Cain. "And yet..." he cracked a smile at her. "You don't know all that it's capable of, do you?"

She counted at least three Telekinesis brands, and four each of Thunder and Flamedancer. Quite a few Healing and Toughness brands as well. But where were...ah! She finally found them, a cluster of circular brands representing the Anti-brands that she had only recently discovered. They were all fairly tiny on his skin, and there were at least a dozen that she could see, wrapping around his arm. How many could he even fit on his body with all of those other brands?

Cain took her distraction for confirmation of his guess. His grin widened. "You don't have any advantages, do you? You're just hoping that if you face me in combat, you'll get lucky."

His words broke Jak's concentration and she stared back at the man. "I won't let you kill another soul."

"Very well, I will leave you alone," he said, surprising her enough that she didn't continue counting the Anti-brands. "This...thing takes some convincing," he shook the Pillar of Time in front of him. "But I'll be back after my demons have had their way with you. Let them do

the dirty work, and I'll clean up the pieces. Who knows? Perhaps one of them will get lucky and kill you too."

Jak's rage bubbled up inside her. Just then, Cain vanished.

"No!" she yelled and immediately activated the Pillar of Space. She intercepted Cain at the base of the tower, smashing into him as her Pillar guided her forward. Cain fell to the ground, though still maintained his grip on his own Pillar.

"I told you, you would never hurt another soul!" she screamed, before calling on the Pillar of Space and winking them both out of Foothold and carrying them far away.

In the second it took to call on the Pillar's magic, she thought about where she could take Cain. She could transport him into the sun, or simply out into the void between worlds. Even with the brands and magics that Cain wielded, he wouldn't last for long in such places. Eventually he would die, and Jak would be free to grab his Pillar and leave in no more than the time it took to snap your fingers.

But in that moment, she felt the Pillar protest. No, it would not take Cain to a place that would kill him. That would be using its power for evil, as Cain was forcing the Pillar's companion to do. Jak could not ask that of it.

So instead, she called on the Pillar to take her far away. Immediately they sprang into existence over an ocean, this one on the other side of Earth, as far away as it was possible to go and still remain on the planet.

Then she kicked out and let go of Cain.

"I am immortal," he yelled as he fell away from her. "You will never kill me. You only delay your inevitable death."

"If death is inevitable," Jak responded. "Then one day it will come for you too."

On that parting note, she activated the Pillar's magic again, sending her back where she came, just as Cain managed to use his Telekinesis to speed towards her. The last thing she heard was his scream as she disappeared from his view.

She appeared immediately back at Foothold, hovering above the wall and staring back out towards the demons that lay beyond. They had stopped for now. It was likely their master could not control them directly from where he now stood. Though it was obvious he still held some control, and it wouldn't take long for Cain to come back, especially with the Pillar of Time in tow. She could only hope that the Pillar would wear him out enough that his return would be slow.

Turning, she scanned for Skellig. She found her on the front wall, standing next to Naem and a few other commanding officers. Jak flew down to meet them.

"I've bought you a day at most," she said as her feet touched the

stone. "Though he will be back, and he won't be as reckless to attack us outright like that again. He'll be more careful."

"I'm grateful that you took him away for now," said Skellig. "But you're right, we can only expect him to learn from each mistake and get better and better until you or the rest of us cannot stop him."

"Which means we need to find a more permanent solution," said Naem.

"We've been working on that," said Jak, thinking back to her little side project on Illadar.

"Well we can't just work on it anymore," Naem continued. "Perhaps we should start by doubling our search for his base of operations. Everything seems to suggest he's been hiding in the mountains somewhere. Possibly to the west."

Jak frowned. "When the demons took me that first time, they were east of here."

"Yes, but these demons all appeared from the west side. Perhaps the demons that took you would have turned that way eventually."

Skellig shook her head. "That would still not explain why the Shadow Elves never found such a place. They've explored every inch of these mountains, to the east and west."

"Cain is capable of magic we are only barely coming to understand," said Jak, holding a hand up. "I'm sure illusions could be among them. Perhaps the Shadow Elves never got a glimpse of his hideout because he never wanted them to."

"But that means it could be anywhere?" said Skellig, frustrated. "I don't see that as a viable strategy if all we have is twenty-four hours."

"No, I think Naem might be onto something," said Jak. "Cain hinted that he had access to things, Relics of the ancestors, his parents. And I may have an idea on how to reach them."

Jak could only wish further that she had the Pillar of Time as the hours melted away. It seemed the more you wanted time to move slower, the more it would speed up. Already three hours were gone and she had not even started her own search for Cain's secret hideout. She'd spent most of that time consulting with Skellig, Naem, and some of the remaining Shadow Elves on the layout of the Hollow Peaks.

But there simply wasn't any more time to be had. She had to set out before Cain returned. Already it seemed the demons that lay not far from their walls were forming ranks again, likely guided by Cain's mind as he drew even a little bit closer. Though they moved little, and they could only hope that Cain couldn't concentrate on them long enough to get them to attack. Not yet anyway.

Soon enough, she downed a small portion of meat and cheese, said a goodbye to Naem and Skellig, telling them what to say should Seph show up looking for her, and set off.

By set off, that meant she used the Pillar of Space to transport her directly to the summit of one of the Hollow Peaks. It wasn't the tallest nearby mountain, but it was centrally located, and seemed as good a place as any to start her search.

Chill winds whipped at her clothing, but she hardly felt it thanks to her Toughness brands. Her shorter hair flowed around her face, and she closed her eyes and felt the harsh touch of cold air. The wind tasted of snow.

Now came the moment of truth. Holding the Pillar of Eternity in front of her, she concentrated. The Pillar had a consciousness of sorts. She had only ever communicated with it directly when she'd first found the thing, on top of Mt. Knot. This mountain was not all that different, though not as tall. Perhaps that would help it speak to her again.

I need your help, she thought, nearly speaking the words out loud. *You know what Cain's doing, perverting even your comrade to his will. He will do the same with all life should he get the chance.*

She listened, both inwardly and audibly. Yet she heard nothing.

However.

There was something there, almost a feeling or an intuition, similar to what she had felt in the split second before the staff had guided her and stopped Cain from killing an innocent person. It did have a will, and it was concerned. Perhaps even more concerned for the nature of its companion Pillar than she was.

Yet even then, it did not speak. So why did it feel like it was reaching out.

Jak turned around and opened her eyes in frustration. "Why can't you just talk to me?" she said out loud. "None of this is very..."

She paused. The feeling she'd had before, like the Pillar was reaching out to her. Suddenly it felt like it was reaching beyond her, or rather behind her.

She turned back again. Yes, the feeling was still there, only now she faced in the direction the Pillar seemed to indicate.

An idea dawned on her. Holding the Pillar out in front of her, she held her hand out flat, balancing the staff on her palm.

Immediately, the staff began to turn.

Jak laughed out loud, almost dropping the Pillar as its head pointed in the same direction it appeared to be reaching. The staff was pointing her the way!

Jak tightened her grip on the staff and called its magic to her aid. In a flash, she had moved about a mile forward, straight in the direction the Pillar of Space had indicated.

This time she felt the pull even stronger. They were closer now. Something was there, calling to the Pillar of Space. And not just calling it. Whatever it was, it shared some kind of kinship with the staff, almost in the same way that the two Pillars of Eternity felt bonded. Jak could feel the connection like that of a family member. Whatever lay ahead, it was calling the Pillar of Eternity home.

She used the Pillar again, jumping another mile ahead of her, this time coming to rest slightly down a mountain ridge. This was closer, but they weren't there yet. Another magic-aided jump brought them to the next mountain. Whatever it was, it was close now. Jak could almost feel it radiating around her, feel the excitement build in the Pillar of Eternity itself.

From what Jak could tell, they were heading west as Naem had predicted. Though it was hard to tell how far. She was sure they were still in the Hollow peaks though.

She was close. She could feel it. Holding up the Pillar for another jump, she felt its eagerness as once again they moved closer to its kin.

Jak blinked as the environment materialized around her. They were in a deep crag in the mountain, and it was nearly dark thanks to the pines and brush that filled the area and blocked out the light. Yet

as her eyes adjusted, she saw something ahead in the rock face.

A thin opening lay there, almost too small for a person to climb through, and most would not expect it to lead anywhere, thinking it was just another cut in the rock. But Jak knew better. Based on the feeling she was getting from the Pillar of Space, she knew that whatever she sought lay within the mountain, and this was almost certainly the entrance she was looking for.

She had to turn sideways to enter. The walls of the crack were close, and while she managed to navigate the entrance well enough, she imagined it would have been hard for a larger person like Cain to squeeze through.

Regardless, she forgot all about that as the Pillar of Space seemed to almost glow with anticipation. This was a place it knew, one it had not seen in millenia. And now it was coming back home.

She continued pushing herself alongside the cleft in the wall until suddenly the wall dropped off, and she nearly stumbled as she lost her source of support.

The place was dark, though after blinking a lot, a small glow in the distance became visible. This was a lot like being back in Mt. Harafast actually. Though the glow in the distance was a colder, bluer light, not the warm light of Mt. Harafast's lava pool. Whatever it was, the staff wanted to go there. Well, she could oblige.

She began stepping forward, feeling at the smooth rock beneath her feet. Usually a cave held a lot of obstacles, but she found the rock here to be incredibly smooth, as if someone had already cleared it of stalagmites and odd rocks. Using the staff for stability, she made her way closer to the strange light ahead. It was coming from around a corner. She was almost there, getting ready to round it...

She nearly dropped the Pillar of Space as a view opened up before her.

The light was coming from what looked like crystals. Very large crystals. Some of them rose from the bottom of the cavern, all the way to the top. And this was no small cavern. Its ceiling had to be several hundred feet above her head. What contrast considering the entrance to this place was so small. She could run at her top speed for minutes and not reach the other side of this place.

She tiptoed forward, trying not to make any sound in case one of Cain's demons was still here. Cain was likely still making his way back from where she had left him, and would be a few more hours yet. However, he might come back here first before attacking at Foothold again, so she had to be quick and careful.

The Pillar of Space still compelled her forward. There were objects down there, something more than these enormous and beautiful crystals that framed the chamber. She had to get a better look.

Moving forward, and slightly downward as the chamber opened up, she couldn't help but stare upward at the spectacle above her. Who would have thought that a being as wretched as Cain could live in a place so full of natural beauty. At least she thought it was natural.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

Jak jumped and instinctively ignited a flame in one palm, whirling around to see who had spoken. But her face relaxed upon seeing him.

"Marek," she said, extinguishing her flames. "I was wondering when I would find you."

"You're here earlier than I would have expected," he said. "Though I had no doubt you would find it eventually." His face was calm, and he didn't seem the least bit troubled to see her. Well that was good. She hoped.

"What is this place?" she asked.

"This is the site of our ancestors' first dwelling place. They came from the stars and crashed not far from here. They found this cave and it became their home for a long time."

"Our first ancestors, as in..."

"Adam and Eve, the parents to Cain and many others, the first of our number here on Earth."

"That's...that's an incredible find," Jak stared around again in wonder.

Yet Marek only shrugged, as if it were a passing interest. "This is also where they developed and honed their magic, the reason for their banishment. They created the first brands here, and passed them down to their descendants. They also created the first Relics, including..."

Jak held up the Pillar of Space in front of her. The runes seemed to pulse, reflecting the light of the crystals around it. Now it made sense why the staff was so attracted to this place. This was where it was born.

But she couldn't delay long in sightseeing. Turning to Marek with a more urgent look on her face, she said, "Marek. You have to help me. Is there anything here that can give me an advantage over Cain? He said he had technologies..."

Marek smirked. "He says a lot of things."

Jak's eagerness faltered. "But the Pillar, it's attracted to something here, something more than just the location. There's some kind of...Relics or technology here, I can feel it."

"What you feel is the ship. Come, I'll show you."

He began walking forward, his form silhouetted in the cold light. Jak hesitated at first, but chose to follow. She was reasonably sure that Marek meant her no harm. For now at least. There was still something unsettling about him. He wasn't completely the Marek she had grown up knowing. Something was different.

“Marek,” she said as they walked. “Why don’t you come back with me?”

He stayed silent for several steps before answering, “Why don’t you come with *me*?”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“The two of us together could probably beat Cain, but he’s right about one thing. The Fae are dangerous. You’d be wiser to ally yourself with me than with them.”

Jak’s eyebrows furrowed. “The Fae are peaceful.”

“For now,” he said, still not looking back at her as he strode forward. “What happens when they decide they are superior to humans?”

Jak was about to retort when she remembered Vander and his betrayal. No, she couldn’t guarantee that such a thing wouldn’t happen. It was possible. Even on Illadar, a place built on peace, she could imagine that such dissension would eventually come.

“I think you’re missing the point,” said Jak. “I’m not allying myself with them because they are or are not dangerous. I’m allying myself with them because they are oppressed. Many would have died without help.”

“And that makes it okay if they become a greater problem later?”

“What comes later is their responsibility, and that of those who come after me. Right now, I am responsible for my own actions, and I will not allow them to suffer when I can do something about it.”

Marek turned back to look at her, a slight smile on his lips. “Always the compassionate one.”

“But you haven’t answered my question, Marek. Why do you stay here? We could protect you.”

He snorted. “I would be no safer there than I am here. Besides, there is much to learn.”

He waved a hand at a large shape in front of them. Jak had been too busy talking that she hadn’t even noticed where they were going. The shape was something like a large boulder, surrounded by more of the strange, glowing crystals. But there was something off about this boulder. It was too angular, too shiny, like it was mostly made of metal.

“This is what Cain calls a ship,” said Marek.

“Like one that sails on the ocean?” Jak asked, confused. It didn’t look at all like any of the ships she had seen in Skyecliff. For one, it was too small. More along the lines of a large fisherman’s boat, but not a full ship.

“This one sails between planets,” said Marek, his expression finally changing from his grim stoicism to awe. “Between stars.”

Jak stared at the ship with newfound respect. So this was what

brought her first ancestors to this planet. What kind of secrets could it hold? Surely this is what Cain had been talking about when he mentioned the assets at his disposal. But was the ship a weapon as well as a method of travel?

Marek reached forward and placed his palm on some kind of panel. At his touch, a portion of the angular craft broke away from the rest of it, lifting up to reveal an opening. And all that from a simple touch? What kind of magic did this ship possess?

Marek stooped to climb into the opening, turning and beckoning Jak to follow. She only hesitated a little bit. Sure, she would be somewhat vulnerable in such a confined space with Marek, but curiosity won out in the end.

She stepped into the starship.

The insides were just as odd as the outside. Most of it was made

of metal, including a grate of metal that she stood on. Giant cords that looked like rope, but were smooth and colorful covered the walls on all sides. Marek led her forward to the end of the ship, which she assumed was the front. The top portion was transparent like glass, though she had never seen glass curve like this before.

“This is where you control it,” he said, pointing down at a series of small levers and buttons. Jak had never seen so many levers before in her life, and built so tiny.

“Does any of this work?” she managed to ask, her mouth half open as she stared around the room.

“Much of it does,” said Marek. “He’s been slowly restoring it over the years, trying to get it to the point where it can travel the stars again. He’s almost got it.”

“He doesn’t want to stay?” she asked, slightly confused. He had once talked to her about visiting the stars, but she always had the impression that his main goal was to conquer Earth and rule over it like a god.

“Relics, no,” said Marek with a slight laugh. “He hates this place.”

“So why try to kill all of us.”

“Because you’re in his way. He needs tools and resources. The demons were his way of ‘hiring’ servants to aid his work. He cares nothing for the wellbeing of the distant sons and daughters of his brothers and sisters. All he cares about is leaving this planet.”

Jak took a deep breath. “That’s why he wants the Pillars so badly.”

“Indeed,” Marek gave her a knowing look.

“But if he has this starship, why does he need the Pillars.”

“Because after all he’s done, he’s never been able to get the ship working properly. Oh, it will fly, he tells me. But it won’t do much more than escape the Earth’s atmosphere.”

Jak frowned at the odd term. What did atmosphere have to do with trapping the ship so it had to escape?

“He thought simply waiting might help, that perhaps with time

your people would develop technologies that he could use. So he slept for several millennia.”

Once again, Jak frowned. “How could he do that?”

“With these,” said Marek, tapping on some large cylindrical objects in the back of the room that Jak hadn’t noticed on their way in. “Cain calls these cryo tubes. They essentially freeze a person for hundreds of years, as long as they keep working. Then they unfreeze you and it’s like you never aged a day.”

“Incredible,” said Jak. What other secrets would they find here? Already she had seen so much that they could learn from. This was magic on an entirely different level, so much information that she could fill twenty journals, or a hundred. Perhaps when all of this was over, she could spend some time learning about all of it.

“I don’t understand it,” she said after pausing a moment to take it all in.

“It is a lot to comprehend,” Marek agreed.

“No, not that. I don’t understand why Cain didn’t just ask. If he wanted to escape to the stars, he could have asked for my help, or for the Pillars’ help.”

“He did,” said Marek. Jak met his eyes and furrowed her brow. Marek clarified. “When you were in Mt. Harafast, remember. He asked you then if you would join him.”

“That’s not what he asked me. He wanted to dominate Earth and even other planets. I wouldn’t be a part of that.”

“Yet that was your opportunity. You could have stayed by his side and been in a much better position of power, a position you could have used to do even more good.”

“You think I should have accepted his offer?”

“I did,” he gave her a knowing look.

Jak pressed her lips together. She did not like where this conversation was going. “If Cain could leave the planet in this thing, where would he go?”

“From what he’s told me, he would revisit the planet his parents came from, our ancestors. He wants to return home.”

Unexpectedly, Jak felt a moment of pity for her enemy. In the end, he was just a lost soul, trying to go back to where he would be wanted. But no, she couldn’t pity the man. No ends justified the means he had used, the slaughters he had committed. Cain had been too caught up in returning to his ancestral home, that he had forgotten about the family he had on Earth, literally everyone was a distant niece or nephew. Perhaps he even had sons and daughters of his own with their descendants.

“He should have spent more time getting to know us,” Jak said aloud. “Perhaps he could have found home right here.”

“Perhaps,” said Marek. “But what’s done is done.”

“Come back with me, Marek.” Jak pleaded once again. “Don’t fall into the same traps that he created for himself.”

A twinge of some emotion Jak could not identify danced across her old friend’s face. “I can’t right now. Perhaps soon.”

Jak fought back her frustration. When was the man going to listen to her? When Cain was dead?

“Well then,” she said, making her voice more formal. “Is there any way he can use all of this against us?”

“Not to my knowledge,” said Marek. “Though I suppose the ship is equipped with some weapons.”

“Weapons? What kind of weapons?”

“Nothing you need to be concerned with.”

“If it could be used against us, then it’s my concern.”

“You worry too much. Cain is personally capable of far more.”

Jak glanced at the cylindrical objects in the back of the ship’s compartment. “Well at the very least we could destroy those. Especially if what you say is true, that he used them to stay alive for so long.”

This time, Marek’s motions shifted dramatically. “I cannot allow you to do that.”

“Why not?”

“These are precious technologies that will not be invented again for thousands of years!” he said, his voice rising. “You cannot simply destroy them before we’ve extracted all the knowledge we can. And even then, it would not be right.”

“I don’t need Cain awaking thousands of years from now and continuing the same carnage he has wrought on us thus far.”

“So take the ship, but don’t destroy it.” Marek was almost pleading with her, unconsciously shifting his position so that he was between her and the cryo chambers. “Cain is your problem, not his technology. Destroy him, and you’ll have nothing to worry about.”

Jak held his gaze for some time. He really wanted to learn all he could about these things. And Jak couldn’t blame him. She would want the same in his place, though she would never have allied herself with Cain for the purposes of gaining information like Marek had.

“Alright,” she said, causing Marek to breathe easier. “If you’re sure it won’t cause any immediate problems for me or my armies.”

“I can guarantee it.”

Jak wasn’t so sure of that, but she would take her friend’s word for now.

Just then, Marek stared out into empty space, as if listening for something. Jak was about to ask him what was going on, when she felt it as well, a slight discomfort in the pit of her stomach.

"My master is coming," said Marek. "You'll need to leave, or he'll sense you here."

"How did he get here so fast?" Jak said. It had only been six or seven hours since she had last fought with him.

"You'll need to stop underestimating him if you want any chance of winning," said Marek. "I've seen the way you look down on him and his morals. Be careful you don't grow overly confident with righteous intent."

Jak scowled. "I will."

"I imagine you'll have several hours while he recovers from the efforts of traveling and using the Pillar of Time," Marek said hastily. Jak could feel the reason for his urgency. The uneasy feeling in her stomach was increasing fast. "But when he's ready, he'll unleash everything he's got against you and Foothold."

"Those demons, are they..." Jak began.

"They're all he has, Jak. Every single demon he's ever turned all over the world that is still alive. They've all gathered here."

The knot in her stomach grew tighter.

"You have to go, Jak," he said, with a little more urgency. "I'll try to keep him here as long as I can."

"But I'll be going back empty handed," she said. "We have no greater chance of defeating him now than we did before I arrived."

"You're capable of far more than you give yourself credit," Marek replied. "And Cain won't attack you outright like he did before. He'll use his demons to wear you down first."

"That's exactly what I'm afraid of."

"People like you, Jak, they're worth thousands of demons. Remember what happened on the plains of Riverbrook?"

Jak nodded. She'd single-handedly defeated several thousand demons then. But could she even replicate that?

"Don't forget what you've learned. His brands are powerful, and keep him alive. But his magic is not unlimited. Now go!" he said it a little more forcefully this time. Jak didn't argue. She brought the Pillar of Space to bear, called on its magic, and disappeared from the cave.

She re-appeared at the top of the Foothold tower, so she could get a good look at the demon army. The queasy feeling in her gut had shifted, so that now it was no longer as strong. Cain must have arrived at his hideout, and remained there for now. Hopefully he did not decide to attack so soon. The demons were still there, forming perfect ranks and standing absolutely still from what Jak could tell. They knew their master was nearby, and he kept a tight grip on them. Jak measured the situation as best she could. Cain was near, but he was weak. How could they take advantage of that somehow? She didn't want to confront him directly, but perhaps she should? Or was there a

way to wear him down further?

He fears you, came her father's dying words once again. Well then, she would give him something to fear.

Jumping off the tower, she landed below, startling a few nearby soldiers. Her eyes sought out Skellig, who she immediately spotted standing just inside the door of their strategy room. She ran to meet the woman.

"Skellig!" she said as she entered. "We need to move fast. Cain is already back."

Skellig stared at her, "Already? We can't fight him yet?"

"He's back but he's weak. To get here as fast as he has, he would have had to use the Pillar of Time, and doing so drains a person. We need to draw him out before he has a chance to recover."

"What do you propose?"

"I need every troll who came with us, and every Thunderdancer we have in the army."

Comprehension dawned on Skellig's face. "You plan to replicate what happened at Riverbrook."

"Perhaps," she said. "Back then we had a thunderstorm to draw on. There's nothing but clear skies today. But if we can carve a dent into Cain's army, he might be forced to come out and face me."

"While he's still exhausted," said Skellig, nodding her head. "Well, we aren't exactly equipped for any large assaults, but I should be able to gather those you requested."

It took some time, far more than Jak liked, but eventually they were able to round up about a hundred people with a Thunder brand, and about a dozen trolls, including Rael, the troll Jak had first befriended.

She walked up to the enormous, rocky creature and put her tiny hand on his tree-like leg. "I need you all to come with me and link. Can you help me with that?"

Rael nodded, confidently. He seemed to understand human speech a lot better than he used to. He no longer cocked his head when she talked. He still didn't talk much though.

Jak ordered the drawbridge to lower, and she and the rest all marched out of the fortress as fast as they could. They were followed by the trolls, who strained the supports of the drawbridge enough that they had to go out one at a time.

They passed a small farm house, where Jak had first met Yewin and the Bright Elves. It looked just as it had before. So much had changed that even seeing something like that cottage unnerved Jak. It was a reminder that only two and a half years had passed since she was last here.

It wasn't long before they crested a hill and stood within sight of the demon army. The sea of sweating, snarling bodies extended as far as she could see from this angle. There had to be at least two-hundred thousand of them out there, maybe more.

Jak ordered everyone to gather around her. There weren't that many soldiers with Thunder, as it was an aggressive brand, and she and Naem had spent most of their time handing out the passive brands. But there would hopefully be enough.

"What we're going to try," she began, "is something I did once before on the plains near Riverbrook. At that time, I took out hundreds of demons within a few seconds. I'm hoping we can do the same here."

She paused, as if giving them an opportunity to back out or to say something, but they said nothing, choosing instead to look to her.

They waited for her guidance.

So she explained her plan to them and waited for anyone to object. They did not.

"Then go," she said, and they obeyed. The hundred Thunderdancers spread out, dispersing themselves as far as they could around the demon army, though they did not get too close.

The demons could see them at this point. Jak closed her eyes and hoped that Cain was too exhausted to sense what his children were feeling. Otherwise he might learn of what she was about to try before it happened.

The trolls gathered behind her, and Jak felt Rael's enormous, rocky arms grab her from both sides, locking her in place. Well, it was now or never.

With a signal to Rael, she felt the troll begin the link. A flood of power washed into her, like a dam bursting. The trolls were stewards of energy, and so much of it coursed through her veins in that moment.

The air crackled around her, though there was a difference this time. Before, there had been clouds in the sky, and she had been able to use that to her advantage, calling down lightning bolts from the thunderclouds to strike helpless demons below. She didn't have that this time, but what she did have was about a hundred Thunderdancers.

With a rush that felt almost euphoric, she let the power of the trolls rush out of her fingertips, materializing as giant beams of lightning, far thicker and brighter than any Thunderdancer could achieve on their own. She waved her arms, spreading the beams wide, and sending them straight at the Thunderdancers.

The beams hit each of them squarely in the back, knocking them forward slightly. But as was the nature of Thunderdancers, they immediately began absorbing all that energy and redirected it forward.

Even more beams split from their fingertips, spreading in front of them so that the energy Jak directed, fanned out into an array of deadly energy. That energy slammed into the demons.

Immediately, the demons began to die, most with a burning hole in their chest, put there from lightning directed at them from one of the Thunderdancers. Usually, someone with a Thunder brand could only pull off a few bursts of lightning without the help of something like a thunderstorm, but this was different. This time Jak called on the energy from her link with the trolls, and used that to fuel the Thunderdancers. And it was enough.

Dozens, hundreds, and possibly even thousands of demons began to die at their hand. The fan of lightning appearing almost like a sea

of light, radiating outward from the men and women at Jak's command.

And yet, there were still thousands more.

Jak felt a lurch in her stomach, and that feeling that targeted Cain's whereabouts began to grow stronger. He was aware of what they were doing, and he was coming to do something about it. Their plan had worked!

But there were other problems. The demons were charging them now, pouring and tumbling over the bodies of their fallen comrades. Even as they did so, Jak and her team took them down, but others took their place, leaping off the bodies of their dead and coming closer and closer.

It was time to leave.

Without pausing to issue a command to retreat, Jak activated her several Telekinesis brands, using them to lift all of the Thunderdancers, herself, and the trolls into the air. Even with more than one Telekinetic brand, it took some work to lift the enormous and heavy Fae in addition to a hundred soldiers and herself.

But after several long moments where Jak all but held her breath, they were over the stone wall of Foothold, and she was waving people to get out of the way so she could set them down.

Moments later, and she could focus again. Retrieving the Pillar of Space from Naem, she looked ahead at the mass of demons. She had struck the first blow, and it had worked. Cain was on his way, as were the remaining demons. Her men had managed to take out a good portion of the army, maybe fifty thousand or so. But that was still not a lot compared to the might that came for them now.

The ground began to rumble from the sheer size of the attacking army.

"They will come over the wall," she shouted to all who could listen. "But remember, whatever you do, you have my brands. Each one of you can best a thousand demons. The odds are not stacked against us, they are stacked against them."

She caught a few more confident expressions. But that was all Jak had time to see. The first of the demons were spilling into the moat.

For a moment, Jak felt a sensation like she had been in this exact situation before, though her first battle here, she had had only one brand, and there had been far fewer demons by comparison.

But this time was different. A huge wave pushed back against the demons as the handful of Water Fae Jak had brought with her began using their powers. The water swept through the demons, pulling them off of their feet and back into their comrades. Others choked and died as they tried and failed to find a way out of the water.

Even with the help of the Water Fae, the demons kept coming,

moving around the wave and bounding at the Water Fae themselves. Thankfully, the Water Fae were more than capable of holding the demons off, but they had to swim backward until they reached the point where the moat connected with the river.

It was time for her to get involved.

Activating her Telekinesis brands and her Flamedancer brands, she began forming an enormous fireball above her head, filling it with fire, but containing the energy using Telekinesis. What resulted was a massive ball of flame just begging to be let out of its container.

She hurled it at the nearest swath of demons, and the fireball burst in a satisfying spray of flames, sending demons flying into the air, burning as they fell.

She summoned another fireball, then another. Other Flamedancers and Telekinetics lined the walls, imitating her and raining down fire at the demons below. Hundreds of demons died in huge numbers.

But more took their place, climbing up the bodies of their dead comrades and rising higher and higher along the walls.

Where in the name of the ancestors was Seph? They could really use the help of a dragon right about now.

BOOM! A massive shock wave threw Jak off her feet and sent her careening into the soldiers behind her. Part of the wall had completely blown apart, bricks still falling from the sky.

Jak scrambled to her feet. That had not been an accident. Based on the way the bricks had blown inward, someone had caused the explosion from the outside.

She flew into the air to see a dark shape at the bottom of the wall, or rather, where that section of the wall had been. The figure held a black staff in one hand, and he was staring up at Jak while hordes of demons rushed past him into the void in the wall.

Cain had arrived.

He must have used a giant fireball on the wall, blowing it inward. Well Jak could leave the soldiers to deal with the demons. They could handle themselves. But Cain was her fight.

She leapt off her place on the wall, angling herself to fly right at her enemy.

But Cain, almost immediately, vanished.

Jak's head flew from side to side, looking for him, but it was of little use. He was using the Pillar of Time, which meant she would be hard pressed to catch up with him. Unless...

She called on the Pillar of Space to guide her. If it could lead her to him as before, perhaps she could keep him from killing anyone else while using the Pillar of Time.

With a tap on the ground, the Pillar sent her flying through space, to materialize...outside of the two armies. Cain almost collided with

her, stopping just long enough for their eyes to meet, for her to see the exhaustion evident in the red lines of his eyes and the sweat on his brow. Then like before, he disappeared as he began running again.

Jak stared at her surroundings. The demons and Foothold were far behind them now. Why was Cain leaving the battle? Did he know that he couldn't fight her directly after being so worn down by using the Pillar?

Something smelled like a trap, or a ploy to get her away from the battle. But she would never have another chance like this to take out her greatest enemy. This was her best opportunity to kill Cain once and for all. If she could do that, all the demons would die, or at the very least, lose their commander, which would be enough for her and her army to mop up what was left.

She had no choice but to follow.

Calling again on the Pillar of Eternity, she sent herself in pursuit of Cain. Once again, they nearly collided as she appeared right on top of him. But he quickly picked himself up and continued running, though this time Jak could see that he was even more tired than before.

The third time it happened, Cain stopped running and simply rose into the air with Telekinesis and sped off, aided by the Pillar of Time. That would be faster, but it would also wear him down even further. How much stamina did Cain have? Jak had to admit, she would have been unconscious by now with all that effort, especially if the Pillar of Time was resisting her command.

She kept going, traveling in an instant to wherever Cain was, the Pillar of Space sensing its companion, and bringing Jak to meet it.

This time, Cain was waiting for her. His arm came racing to meet her face as she appeared. The impact sent her flying backward, her eyes seeing stars. Then she tripped over something she couldn't see and fell backwards.

But instead of hitting the ground, as she expected, she kept falling, the sound of rushing water reaching her ears.

Where were they? Jak blinked against the stars that still swam in her face as she fell. Yes, she recognized this. This was Tradehall. And that meant that she was falling into...

A wave of cold engulfed her as she hit the rushing water of the canal. She submerged briefly before coming back to the surface, taking a deep breath, and searching for something to hold onto before the current washed her away.

But there was no current. The way out appeared to be blocked, and the water was rising. Someone had erected some kind of dam to keep the water flowing in, but not out.

"You once told me that I underestimated you," Cain said, panting

from the edge, looking down on her. His face was red and he looked utterly exhausted. "And you were right. But you should also learn not to underestimate me."

It was the same thing Marek had told her earlier.

With a wave of Cain's hand, something fell on top of Jak's head, temporarily knocking her under the water, and would have shattered her skull had she not borne all her Toughness brands.

Cain had telekinetically brought down an enormous stone slab over this part of the canal, essentially turning the place into a giant stone box, quickly filling with water. The trap had been sprung.

But what was Cain thinking? All she had to do was use her Telekinesis to raise the stone slab the same way he had lowered it.

A hand wrapped itself around Jak's wrist, and a strong force wrenched her downward. Jak didn't even manage to get a good breath in before she was underwater.

The light was dim, but her Sightseer brand granted her a little extra help. She opened her eyes underwater and glared at her attacker.

She wasn't sure if she should have been surprised or not as she saw the queen next to her in the water. Queen Telma was covered in tiny Strength brands, dozens of them, perhaps hundreds. And as the woman jerked on Jak's arm, Jak's cry was muffled by the water and pain lanced through her bones.

Suddenly, the danger of her current plight began to sink into her, just as she was sinking and Telma pulled at her. Yes, Jak had Healing and Toughness brands in abundance, but even people like her needed air. They had even considered a plan similar to this one to get rid of Cain, though they had eventually dropped it in favor of her secret plan.

But drowning in water was still a very real option, and with Telma there to keep her down, the makeshift chamber could become the trap that killed her.

Calling on her brands, she tried to propel herself with Telekinesis. But just as she began climbing, and dragging Telma with her, the woman wrapped her arms around Jak's chest and squeezed.

For the first time, Jak inhaled some water. The pain in her chest was unbearable as ribs enhanced by Toughness cracked under the strain and tried to heal even as Telma crushed them further. Her Telekinesis winked out as her concentration wavered.

There was water in her lungs now, causing an involuntary cough, which only made things worse. And where was the Pillar of Space? She'd had it when she fell into the chamber. Cain wouldn't be able to grab it while the chamber was sealed. He probably hoped she would die and he could take it off her cold body once the deed was done.

She had only one other choice. With the last of her strength, she called on her Flamedancer brand to heat the water around her. Almost instantly, she felt her skin protest as the water began to boil. Telma protested as well, pulling Jak down further and tightening her already

vice-like grip on her chest.

Jak's vision began to waver, and not just because she was underwater. She was losing oxygen, and her Healing brands could not keep up with Telma's crushing and her lack of air.

Pouring every last ounce of strength into her branding, she increased the amount of heat and flames around them, trapped them in a ball of Telekinesis, and let it explode.

If she didn't have her Healing brands, the force would have stripped every shred of flesh from her bones, and probably pulverized those as well. As it was, the stone chamber Cain had built exploded outward in a rush of rubble and spray.

The force propelled Jak forward, so that she landed just outside of the trap Cain had sprung on her. Her ears rang, but she could feel the shuddering thunder as giant pieces of stone rained down around her.

Bending violently towards the ground she hurled a lung-full of water out of her mouth. She coughed and coughed for what seemed like ages, though it was probably only half a minute. When she finished with the worst of it, the white gleam of the Pillar of Space brought her back to reality.

She scrambled forward to pick it up from where it lay several meters away. She was still coughing but managed to stare around her. The structures around the canal were now in ruins, and Jak knew instinctively that Queen Telma was gone. No one could have survived that blast without multiple Healing brands, and Jak had seen none on the queen's body. The woman had been a last pawn in Cain's hands, her last act that of a suicide attacker.

Cain, she saw nowhere. Clearly he had left to let Telma finish the job. If he was still here when Jak triggered the blast he would have left by now, knowing he would be unable to take the Pillar from her while she was still alive. He had done all he could and now would need to rest. But the demons would likely continue to fight, which meant she had to get back to Foothold as fast as possible.

It was only then that Jak realized she had not a shred of clothing on. All of it had disintegrated in the blast. For once, she was grateful that Tradehall was a ghost city.

She quickly investigated the grand hall at the center of the city, the only building not previously destroyed by Cain, and it didn't take long to find another set of clothing that fit. She wasn't sure who it had belonged to in the past, a noblewoman probably, but one with some curious hobbies. The clothes were dark and made of stained and polished leather. Armbands fit snugly on Jak's forearms and it even included a mud guard around her waist and legs that Jak rather liked.

Soon, she was ready to head back to Foothold.

When the Pillar of Space took her there, she found the place still

erupting in chaos. From where she landed on top of the fortresses tower, she could see that the demons' numbers were down by maybe half, a huge number. But too few of her own soldiers and Fae were still fighting. They were maybe down by a thousand, and with tens of thousands more demons to go, that loss might be ultimately fatal.

What could she do? If she joined the fight she would be only one among thousands of fighters. Sure, she could probably kill far more than the rest, but it would still take hours to take out enough to matter. Many more would continue to die, maybe all of them.

Despite all that, she chided herself for thinking too hard. There was a battle to be won here, and more would die the longer she dawdled.

Leaping from the tower, she landed with an enormous thud that threw back demons unlucky enough to be close to her point of impact.

Doing nothing but raising her hands, fire and lightning began pouring out of them, taking demon after demon. She still held the Pillar of Space, but for now it lay dormant in her hand, acting only as a guide for her fire as she sent it hurdling into the nearest demons.

Dozens died around her, but there were still thousands more. At this rate, she would kill all of them in several days' time. Even with the help of her army, this would be a close battle, and she could not afford to lose so many.

A piercing roar cracked the air around them. For a moment, it seemed as though every head turned in the direction of the sky, plunging the fortress into silence. Even the demons paused for a split second.

A winged dragon swooped in from the side of the mountain, fire gushing from its mouth and enveloping a group of demons just outside the walls. The demons immediately crumpled into ash as the dragon flew by them.

Cheers began erupting all around Jak, and a smile dawned on her dirt-covered face. Seph was here, he was finally here!

Seph, now in the form of a dragon, raced along the edge of the battle, catching all of the demons that still stood near the back, where he was not at risk of harming the soldiers. None of the demons that met that fire survived.

A low rumble sounded to the east. Jak turned to look, confused. That wasn't coming from any of the demons, or from Seph. There was something else out there.

Curious, she flew into the air towards the fortress wall, peering into the long shadows.

What she saw caused her eyes to widen. It wasn't another sea of demons, though someone without the aid of Sightseeing might have thought so. From a distance they looked like a dark sea of massive

creatures, and that's exactly what they were. But they were not demons. They were animals. Large animals, small animals, even birds. Bears, wolves, eagles, horses, stags, both predators and herbivores were moving at top speed towards their little fortress.

Though several years ago she would have been frightened of such a sight, for some reason she felt strangely calm. Others who stood beside her on the wall certainly reacted in fear, gasping and running towards the tower, the only bastion of safety they had left.

"Hold," Jak shouted to all that could hear her. "They're not here for us."

The eagles and hawks arrived first. With breathtaking speed, they hurtled downward at the demons, their claws bared, and their cries echoing around the fortress. Demon cries soon joined them as talons tore through their faces and eyes.

The horses came next, followed closely by the wolves and bears. They barreled into the demons like they were nothing, tramping them underfoot, and occasionally, in the case of the predators, opening their jaws to finish a demon off. They did nothing to Jak's soldiers, most of whom were running for their lives at this point.

Jak's eyes found Seph, who was circling the fortress at this point. Most of the demons were gone, at least those that he could burn without hurting a soldier or an animal in the crossfire. Had this been what Seph had left to do? Gather as many of these beasts as he could, to bring another army to their aid?

The dragon circled around the Pillar. Flapping its wings and landing with a crunch that shook the structure to its core. Jak smiled and flew to meet her husband.

When she arrived on the top of the tower, Seph had changed back to his human form. His face was practically alight with energy and his eyes flashed when he saw her. She ran to him, and he ran to meet her. They met and clung to each other, kissing hungrily.

When they broke, Jak grabbed him by the shirt and pulled him closer. "You could have told me that was your plan."

"I wasn't sure if it would work," he admitted with a shrug. "I've always had a way with animals, but I wasn't sure I could actually communicate well enough to bring so many to our aid. And I knew you would rather have me around than run the risk of a battle without me."

Jak sneered, "and don't tell me I would have been wrong. We could have used you from the beginning. You could have taken out most of that army before they ever reached the walls."

"I won't argue with that," he said. "But I needed to gather them for other reasons. They want what I have. Did you bring the Brandless with you?"

Jak shook her head. "We didn't have room for everybody, and they seemed like the logical choice to leave behind."

"They are far more valuable than you know, Jak," he said with a hint of worry on his face. "We have to bring them soon, or take the animals to see them on Illadar. Perhaps that would be better, as we don't really have any animals on the planet yet."

"You think the Brandless are meant to become shifters like you?"

Seph shook his head. "Perhaps not all of them, and I don't expect all of these animals to find a compatible person either. But they need to be given that chance, Jak."

"And what if the Brandless don't want to be Fae either?" Jak added. "We never talked about how it's okay for people to turn into Fae without choosing, but somehow it isn't okay to receive a brand they don't want."

"The change into a Fae is not voluntary because that is the way it should be." Seph said, waving a hand. "Almost everyone who becomes one would agree with me that they don't regret it, that it feels natural."

"I know," said Jak, having heard as much from her mother, Amelia, and many others.

They both turned to look at the battle raging on below. Emboldened by the arrival of the animals, and after realizing that they were not about to become lunch, the soldiers rejoined the battle, fighting alongside carnivores and beasts of burden to eradicate demon after demon. There were literally hills created out of nothing but demon bodies.

But they were winning. For the first time since Jak had seen the demons on their doorstep, she no longer had any doubt as to the victor.

Both she and Seph joined back in the battle, but neither had much more work to do. The battle was all but won, and Jak's abilities served only to mop up the remaining stragglers. Soon, there was nothing but the sound of cheers as it dawned on everyone there that they were victorious.



YET THE BATTLE was not without cost. As Jak had guessed, nearly a thousand remained unaccounted for in the hours following the battle. For the next two days, they spent their time piling up demon bodies outside of the fortress, where Seph would envelop them in dragon fire, almost instantly vaporizing them into dust, blowing east in the wind.

Jak helped where she could, but she couldn't help but wonder

what Cain was up to, or what he was thinking. They had essentially eradicated all of his armies in one blow. It would take decades for Cain to raise such an army again, and that was time he likely did not have.

It took everything she had not to simply rush into his hideout and fight him then and there. The man didn't know that she had been to his home. She could take him by surprise before he had a chance to recover from their last encounter.

But both Seph and Skellig told her to be patient. Cain would know that his armies were gone, that only he and Marek remained. If they fought him now, he would act erratically, like a cornered animal, and that could be dangerous. No, they needed to bide their time, to meet Cain on their own terms.

Jak wasn't so sure. For her, the longer they waited, the more time they gave Cain to prepare for their next battle. Who knew what more he had under his sleeves. He had already managed to create a trap for her in Tradehall, and it almost worked too. What would he plan for her next?

Perhaps the better reason for staying was the fact that Seph was back with her. They spent much of their time together, some of it going over their strategies, but other moments simply lying in each other's arms, feeling the comfort of their mutual presence.

Once the dead were buried and burned, Seph insisted that Jak

take the animals to Illadar. Most of them had simply taken up residence alongside the fortress, somehow prevented from attacking the humans or each other by a command from Seph. Though even the dragon shifter had to admit that some of the carnivores would have to eat eventually. They would have to bring extra deer, rabbits, and other animals for that purpose. But they could worry about that later.

Jak had to admit, she needed her rest as well. Taking that many animals to Illadar was going to be nearly as hard as bringing her army back to Earth. There were a lot of them.

"Seph," she said when it became time. "I need you to tell them all to group together, preferably so they are touching."

"Okay," he said. "That shouldn't be too much trouble." He stepped forward, then reached one foot ahead of the other, dragged it in a half-circle along the ground in front of the nearest animals. Then he took that foot and smashed it to the ground. The earth rumbled at an impact that would not have been possible from a normal human's strength. But Seph was a dragon, and the animals understood this even while he was in his human form.

Moving as one, the beasts gathered closer and closer together, until all were side by side and touching. All of the birds landed so they were perched on a stag's antlers, or the spine of a bear.

Jak raised her eyebrows. "Well that will do."

She stepped forward and took Seph's hand as she did so. Then she knelt down next to the nearest wolf. Several wolves had tried to kill her once, when she had been all but helpless. The Shadow Elves had saved her then, and now she was going to save these wolves, among countless other animals.

Reaching for the magic of the Pillar of Space, she tightened her grip on the staff and concentrated. The magic came to her, eager to participate in such a deed. Somehow she could tell it wanted to bring these creatures to Illadar. Unlike death and destruction, this was something it saw as right.

Jak reached out to touch the wolf's head. Instantly she, it, and the entire host of animals vanished from Earth and reappeared on Illadar.

Jak swayed in place, but her vision quickly adjusted this time as she leaned for support on the Pillar of Space and thanked the ancestors for Seph, who steadied her from behind.

Ahead of them stood the Brandless. Many were out working, tilling fields they had only recently planted but were already bursting with life. Others stood outside of the makeshift houses. But almost all of them turned to see the newcomers as they arrived.

Jak expected them to yell or at least act surprised at seeing so many traditionally aggressive animals appear on their doorstep. But to the contrary, many inched forward curiously. There was a look of fascination in their eyes that Jak had seen before, when Seph had stepped forward to meet the newly arrived dragon.

"You were right, Seph," she said, as some of the animals also moved forward to meet their companions. "The Brandless were meant for this. Though I still don't know why having a brand would have prevented them from becoming shifters like you."

"I'm not sure it would have," he said with a shrug. "But there's more to this particular species of Fae than any of the others. This one requires a literal bond with another creature. No one else experienced anything like that. And the brands, I believe they have the power to distract you."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," Seph stumbled like he was trying to find the right words. "I mean that a brand is already a connection of sorts. You form a bond with it. So that could prevent you from forming a bond with an animal."

Jak slowly nodded. "I think I understand." She stared back at the Brandless as they met with their animals counterparts, some of them finding each other instantly, others searching for a time before they found a creature who shared their mutual attraction. She watched as many of them joined together, seeming to meld with one another as Seph had with the dragon. Though in some of their cases, like those with the eagles, the animals were swallowed into the people, rather than the other way around.

"Isn't it beautiful, Jak," said Seph beside her.

She had to admit that it was. This was life living at its full potential. Humans and animals coexisting in the more literal sense.

"There's still one thing that puzzles me though," Seph went on. "For most of the Fae, they only turned after encountering a Relic of some kind. The Shadow Elves were changed by the original copy of the Annals of Adam. The Water Fae by some kind of Water Relic. And the Pillars of Eternity are responsible for almost all of the rest. Except

for three.”

“The Ice Fae, the Nature Fae, and Shifters,” Jak confirmed with a nod.

“So how did we change when we had no Relic to speak of? We have the Pillar of Space, now but the Ice and Nature Fae evolved on Illadar before we had that.”

“Well they were exposed before arriving on Illadar, but I don’t think that’s the reason. I think it’s this place,” said Jak, staring around at the rich, multi-colored plant species, augmented by the light of the lowering sun. “Illadar was created by magic. That could, essentially, make it one giant Relic.”

Seph nodded, putting his arm around Jak and watching as more animals bonded with the Brandless, and the sun set in the distance. “That would explain why the Ice Fae formed first. They were in their element upon arrival. But we Shifters and the Nature Fae had to wait for a third ingredient before our change could be complete.”

“Yes, Li had already transformed from what we could tell, which is why she seemed so sick until I took her back to Earth and she came in contact with actual plant life. She had been sick up to that point because there was no plant life here.”

“And perhaps that’s why the Brandless instinctively knew that they couldn’t accept a brand. Some part of them knew they were already Shifters. But they needed to find an animal to bond.”

“I wonder if a brand would have even worked on one of them,” Jak mused. “All other Fae lost their brands when they transformed. Perhaps the Brandless had already undergone that transformation and we didn’t even know it.”

She leaned her head against Seph’s shoulder, watching as wolves howled at Illadar’s two moons, eagles soared into the sky, and bears roared triumphantly as each successfully completed the transformation. Now Seph was not alone, there were more shifters of all varieties.

Not all the animals joined with the Brandless. Some scampered off into the woods. Jak imagined there would always be some animals that remained unbonded. They would have to bring more over from Earth if they wanted a stable ecology. But they would ever after need to be careful when hunting. They couldn’t risk accidentally killing a shifter in animal form. Perhaps there would have to be a law of some kind to prevent hunters from using lethal force, instead focusing on traps only. If they continued hunting at all. Maybe it would be better to farm and raise cattle and sheep instead. It would be safer.

The thoughts darkened her mind, and she nuzzled into Seph’s warm, protective embrace even further, watching the sun continue to set.

“Seph,” she said, her voice more timid than she intended. “What do you want to do when this is all over?”

“You mean once Cain is defeated?” he asked. She nodded, and he sat back, thinking. “I’m not altogether sure. At first I would want to help with the transition, bringing more animals to this side, and recruiting as many from Earth as want to join us. But after that, I don’t know.”

“I want to go back to sheep farming,” she said.

He nodded slowly. “I can see why that would be your desire.”

“Some of my best memories are of learning how to be a shepherd with my father. All those hours spent roaming our grazing lands, with Grettle our sheep dog helping us round up the sheep, spending much of our time looking for any stragglers.”

“Sounds soothing,” Seph agreed.

“It was. But something tells me that I will never enjoy that kind of quiet life again.”

Seph said nothing to that, only pulled her in tighter. He knew she was right. If she lived to see the end of Cain, there was no way the people would ever leave her in peace. They would be looking for a leader, someone to make the laws and keep them. And as much as Jak wished for someone like Skellig or Naem to take up those reins, there was no way the people would respect them as they did her.

“We should head back to Earth now,” said Jak, wiping a bead of moisture from her eye.

“Are you sure you’re ready?” Seph asked, leaving his arm around her. “Bringing all those animals here must have cost you.”

“I’m fine, it was easier than the last time.” That was partly because there had been fewer bodies to transport, but also because Jak was pretty sure each use of the Pillar of Space built her up, like using a muscle. “Cain is still there, and who knows what his plan is, now that all his demons are gone.”

“Alright,” he said, standing and stretching. “Then let’s make sure he doesn’t do anything while we’re gone.”

Jak stood as well, feeling some of her old confidence returning. “I have a few things to take care of first, but then we can go.”

She strayed to the nearby cave, the one that had been a source of such contention back when the air was cold, and the cave was the only shelter they had. Now very few even used it, preferring to be out in the open air, and in houses they had built themselves.

Inside, Jak found several of those same metal sheets that she had used before. She had to finish work on this place now or never. She wouldn’t get another chance before her final battle with Cain. Picking up the nearest metal sheet, she set about branding it.



WHEN THEY ARRIVED BACK at Foothold, everyone there was only too eager to see her. Well, her and Seph. Cheers erupted around them as they strode through Foothold's streets, and into the square. They were encouraged by their victory over the demons, and Seph got several requests to demonstrate his transformation into a dragon.

They pushed by the onlookers, however, and made their way to the base of Foothold's tower. Skellig was there, along with Naem, Yewin, Viona, and all other members of the council except for Amelia and the Water Fae. Most of them were still on Illadar.

"I take it your journey went well?" asked Yewin.

"It is as we suspected," said Jak. "Most of the Brandless were actually Shifters. They just needed a creature to bond."

"Fascinating," replied Yewin, though Skellig looked troubled.

"What is it, Skellig?" Jak asked.

"I can't help but feel like we did something wrong, in leaving them on Illadar, or even suggesting that they take a brand."

"You had no idea what would eventually happen," Jak offered.

"Seph did," said Skellig, waving at Seph. "Perhaps we should have paid more attention. If it weren't for the fact that we had a battle to fight, things might have escalated like they did with Vander."

"I don't know if it would have reached that point," said Jak.

"You didn't see some of the reactions I witnessed. Some of the men and women were extremely upset that their comrades would not fight for them. I can't help but wonder if there will be some lingering distrust of the shifters from now on."

"We can't assume that," said Seph. "Humans are adaptable above all. We will find a way to coexist."

"In any case, it's the least of our problems," said Viona, her arms folded.

"Yes, I agree," said Li. "We have to take this one problem at a time."

Girwirt spoke up next. "Or it'll be like trying to juggle helomushrooms."

As was often the case when Girwirt spoke, Jak narrowed her eyes at the gnome. "What are helomushrooms and how do you juggle them?"

"You can't, they're too big," said Girwirt. "That's what I'm saying."

Oh, well that made sense then. Turning to take in every member of the council, she spoke in a slightly elevated tone. "We have a lot to do, but Viona, Li, and Girwirt are right. We have one primary obstacle that we have to deal with before we can think of anything else."

"How do you propose we take out Cain," asked Skellig, leaning in

to hear Jak's plan.

"I know where he lives," she said. "Or at least one place where he hides, up inside one of the Hollow Peaks west of here."

"You want to ambush him there?"

"We can't take too many," said Jak. "Perhaps a handful of elites, including Seph and I."

"And what about our little plan that we set up earlier?" said Skellig with a glance around at the others. Not all of them knew about their plan.

"That is still an option," Jak confirmed. "I finished work on it just recently. But we don't know if it will work. I would have to transport Cain to get there. I've done it before, but there's no guarantee that I could do that."

"Very well, what are our other options?"

"There's Marek," Jak offered. Skellig's face darkened at that possibility. "I know he works for Cain, currently, but I think I could convince him to turn on his master."

"If that's true, then why hasn't he done so already?" asked Girwirt.

"Because Cain is still more powerful. He might still have some kind of hold on Marek. He's waiting for the right opportunity."

"Still not a guarantee, though," said Yewin, which was true. "Do you have anything else?"

Jak hesitated. Marek would not like the other option that sprang into her mind. "Well, Cain has a lot of...I might call them super Relics in his cave. I'm told they aren't dangerous, but we could use them against Cain."

"How so?" asked Skellig.

"Well, because he doesn't want them to be harmed. If we were to destroy them, it could unhinge him enough that he might attack out of desperation, or turn his back on us in order to save them, which could give us the advantage."

"I say we just overwhelm him," said Naem. "We've proven that his seemingly boundless power is nothing more than a few extra brands. We have that now too, plus a Pillar of Eternity. If we bring some of our best, equipped with even more brands, he'll be powerless against us."

"Don't underestimate him," said Jak, remembering the trap Cain had sprung on her at Tradehall.

"Of course, but it couldn't hurt."

"I agree," said Skellig. "I think brute force is perhaps the best option."

"Alright," said Jak, thinking it through. "But let's make sure to bring Naman and Jamilla. They're Marek's parents, and if anyone can get through to him, they will. Otherwise we'll be fighting both Cain

and Marek.”

“That sounds sensible enough,” said Skellig.

“Ultimately,” said Jak. “I will try to stick to our first plan, using the Pillar of Space to take him away. But if that doesn’t work, we’ll have to rely on some of these other ideas.”

“Backups of our backups,” said Naem with a slight shake of his head.

“And yet we have no true guarantee of success.” Skellig put one hand to her mouth and massaged it, thoughtfully.

A wave of unease passed among the council. They were scared of Cain, that much was evident, though maybe it was more like they didn’t trust themselves. Jak could understand that. There was a time when she hadn’t trusted herself with anything, let alone the fate of several races of people and two planets.

“I know what you’re all feeling,” she said. All eyes in the circle turned to regard her. “And I completely understand. Cain once held me at his mercy, in such a way that escape seemed impossible. But I did escape, and I learned, and I’ve grown. Because there’s a simple solution to fear of the unknown. You make it known.”

The corner of Skellig’s mouth turned up, as did Naem’s. They had both served in the military, and they knew what she was doing.

“We now know more about Cain than we are ever likely to know. I myself am nearly his equal. Together, we far outmatch the man. And that’s not to mention the fact that we just took out every demon he had.”

“Only because we had the dragon,” grumbled Girwirt under his breath.

“It doesn’t matter how we did it, it only matters that we beat them. All of them. Compared to that, Cain should be a small matter.”

Girwirt and Noralim took deep breaths, as did several others within earshot. Jak never fancied herself for speech giving. But maybe it was her status, for the people seemed to hear her, and trust what she was saying.

And what was more, she believed what she was saying. Cain really could be defeated, and she knew it. She knew it better than she knew the back of her Gifter-branded hand.

They waited a day to figure out who would go with them, not to

mention giving even more brands to those elite. Seph was the obvious choice, but he was the only member of the Fae that was allowed to go. Most of the Fae abilities were powerful, but they could not achieve the full potential of someone with dozens of brands on them. Other than Seph that is, since a dragon was essentially equal to someone like Cain.

Skellig and Naem also volunteered. But they would need more, Jak was sure. She spent a few hours debating among the council on who they could trust, or would be the most useful when going up against Cain. In the end, Jak had narrowed it down to two individuals in particular.

“Naman, Jamilla,” she said as she finally found the couple. They were in one of Foothold’s barracks, which had been converted into a small hospital for the wounded. Jak glanced around the room. Thankfully there weren’t many wounded, thanks to the Healing brands Jak and Naem had previously handed out. It had been among their top priority brands, and it looked like that had paid off. Naman and Jamilla stood at one end, helping one man walk a few feeble steps across the room. The man’s legs looked like they had been nearly torn off, but were healing thanks to his brand.

“What is it, Jak?” asked Naman as she approached.

“I need to talk to you in private, if that’s alright.” Jak planted the tip of the Pillar of Space next to her, trying to portray an air of confidence in front of all the wounded.

“Of course, though, uh, where did you have in mind?” Naman looked around them, and the implication was clear. There was no place private anywhere in Foothold. They had far too many people here at the moment.

“Take my hand,” said Jak, offering it. Naman and Jamilla glanced at each other, and something passed between them, an understanding. Silently, they helped the wounded man back down onto his cot, before joining Jak.

In the blink of an eye, Jak called on the Pillar of Space and it whisked them away to a familiar location for all three of them. A cool wind whipped at their clothing in near silence.

“Oh Jak,” said Jamilla. “Did you have to take us here?”

They stood outside of Naman and Jamilla’s old house, what had once been the only store in Riverbrook. Today parts of its roof were missing, water damaged much of the inside, which they could see through the door that hung on one hinge, swinging back and forth in the wind with a prolonged squeak.

“I wanted to remind you of old times,” said Jak, staring at the place where she had spent many hours of her childhood, playing with Marek. “Of what you lost.”

“We haven’t lost him,” said Jamilla. “There is still hope for our son.”

Jak put up a hand. “Perhaps that was a poor choice of words. But we have all lost something, and even Marek is not what he once was. None of us are.”

They stayed silent, understanding in their gazes.

“I think we can help Marek,” said Jak. “I saw him recently. He’s holed up in what I can only describe as Cain’s home.”

“Where?” breathed Naman.

“In the Hollow Peaks. He still stubbornly insists on staying with Cain for now, though he did not seem hostile towards me.” She didn’t mention some of the things he said about learning from Cain. Best to fill them in bit by bit.

“We need to go to him,” Jamilla added hurriedly. “If there’s anyone who can convince him to leave, it’s us.”

Jak nodded. “That’s exactly what I wanted to talk to you about. I’m putting together a small team to infiltrate the place and destroy Cain once and for all. If Marek fights against us, it will be difficult. But if we could turn him to our side, or at least ensure that he doesn’t fight...”

“We’ll do it,” said Naman.

“I wasn’t finished,” Jak said, putting up a hand to signal patience. “If you come, I will need to brand the both of you, with far more brands than you already have.”

Jamilla and Naman exchanged a glance. They looked hesitant.

“I know it could probably take some getting used to.” Jak admitted. “It did for me. And it’s possible that people won’t look at you the same way, even if they think they’re tolerant of multiple brands.”

“You misunderstand, Jak.” Jamilla said, softly. “We’re not going to reject your offer.”

“We’ve...” Naman shifted his feet uncomfortably. “We’ve actually

talked about this possibility before, speculating, idly or so we thought, about what we would do with such a gift.” “And what did you decide?” Jak said, listening closely. Their answer would go a long way in confirming whether Jak’s decision was in good faith or not.

“We’d do exactly what you’re asking of us,” he said. “Find our son and bring him home.” He glanced back at the ruined shop.

“You’ll never be able to return to the life you knew,” Jak warned. “Especially not if I give you this.”

“We know,” said Jamilla. “But it would be worth it if we could have our son back.”

That much Jak could understand. She’d give up just about anything to have her father or mother back, even if it meant losing a part of herself. Thankfully, Naman and Jamilla did not face that dilemma, unless the extra power somehow got to their heads. Jak would forever need to keep a close eye on them, alongside Skellig and Naem for that matter. Anyone with as much power as her would need to be monitored. It was an aspect of her power that Jak hated.

“Very well,” she said. She held out her Gifter arm, readying it for use. “Let’s begin.”

“I’m actually feeling rather good about this,” said Naem,

bouncing slightly on his heels as he waited. He, Seph, and Jak were waiting at the top of the tower for everyone else to join them. When no one replied, he went on. “I mean, we’ve got a dragon on our side, one who very nearly killed Cain the first time they fought. And now that we have not one, not two, but four others who are just as powerful as Jak, I feel like we’re in a much better place.”

Jak nodded inwardly. She had finished branding Naman and Jamilla the day before, giving them over a dozen Healing brands, and multiple copies of Flamedancing, Telekinesis, Toughness, and more. They were essentially brand powerhouses now, along with Naem and Skellig. Jak had given them a few extra brands as well, though Naem had also given himself a few, since he was not only well branded, but another Oren like Jak.

“We certainly have a much better chance of facing him now than we ever did,” said Jak, fingering the white Pillar of Eternity in one hand. “I only hope it will be enough.”

“There was a time when our entire army couldn’t have made a dent in Cain’s ego, much less his person,” said Skellig, emerging from the stairs at the side of the tower. She was followed by Naman and Jamilla, both of whom were now covered from head to toe in various brands, just like Skellig and Naem.

Jak waved them all closer, gathering all in a circle. Seph, who had said nothing so far, merely watched her with arms folded, a confident smile on his face. He trusted her.

“I don’t need to tell you that this will be dangerous,” said Jak, meeting each of their faces. “We might not all make it out of this alive.”

“We’re ready for that possibility,” said Naem, his tone unusually sober.

The rest nodded in confirmation.

“Well then,” said Jak, feeling herself grow more and more determined. “Remember the plan. Naman and Jamilla are primarily

responsible for dealing with Marek, hopefully by turning him to our side if possible, but at the very least, taking him away from the battle.”

Naman and Jamilla both nodded, but said nothing.

“The rest of you will attack Cain with everything you’ve got. If we have to, we can destroy his starship and other Relics to get his attention, though I recommend doing that only after Naman and Jamilla succeed with Marek. He seemed rather attached to preserving them.”

Once again, a line of nods met her eyes.

“With your distractions, I will do my best to take the Pillar of Eternity from him, or at least transport him to Illadar to spring our trap. If that doesn’t work, we will use brute force, but let’s hope that won’t be necessary. Try to get him in a position where Seph can deal the killing blow.”

She glanced at her husband, who nodded, though there was some mild unease among the group at this last option. In order to send dragon fire at Cain, he would likely have to be held down, or at least deprived of the Pillar of Time. That meant certain death for whomever held Cain in place long enough for Seph to spew dragon fire.

But it would not come to that. They had a plan, with multiple backups. They would win this. No cost was too great if it meant the safety of the entire human race and those of the Fae.

“We’re ready,” said Skellig, holding out her hand. Naem quickly joined her, placing his hand on Skellig’s. Both Naman and Jamilla followed suit, followed by Seph, who looked at Jak expectantly.

Jak took a deep breath, activated the Pillar of Space, and placed her hand last on that of the others.

Instantly, she transported them inside the cave in the western Hollow Peaks.

It took awhile for her eyes to adjust, but it wasn’t long before she caught the glow in the distance that represented the strange crystals that grew from floor to ceiling. She had brought herself and the rest of them inside the cave.

Cain must have been resting, for he had not jumped out of the shadows, and the cave even appeared empty, though Jak knew from the uncomfortable flutter in her stomach that such was not the case. Cain was here, just ahead of them in the vast chamber. They could only hope that he was sleeping, still recovering from his exhaustive use of the Pillar of Time.

“I figured you would come here,” said a calm voice from one corner.

All of them spun to see who had spoken. In the pale blue light reflected from the crystals, Jak could make out Marek sitting on a rock

not ten paces away from them.

"My master is sleeping," he confirmed, and Jak felt a stab of hope. Perhaps they could sneak up on the demon king.

"Are you here to help us?" Jak asked, placing the tip of the Pillar of Space on the ground.

"That depends on what you plan to do," he continued in that calm voice. "Are you only here to kill him, or do you plan to destroy his work as you once suggested."

Jak swallowed. She had hoped Marek wouldn't bring this up. But now that he had asked, she couldn't exactly ignore the question, or he would assume she meant the starship harm. "That is not our plan, though if it were the only way to distract Cain long enough to gain the upper hand, we would do it."

Marek tightened his fists and hung his head. "You'd better not." He said it with such coldness that Jak almost took a step back. What would he do if they did try to destroy it?

"Marek." It was Jamilla, standing in the back. She moved to one side and around Jak to be plainly visible in the low light. Naman followed.

Marek looked at them as if genuinely surprised. "Mother?" he said, his eyebrows furrowed as if confused. "What are you doing here?"

"Jak asked us if we would come," Naman responded.

Marek looked at Jak. "Using my greatest weakness against me?"

"Attachment is not a weakness," said Jak. "It can be your greatest strength."

"And yet your ability to let go of your mother was what saved us all on top of Mt. Knot."

Jak frowned. He didn't have to argue the point when his parents were right there.

But both Jamilla and Naman seemed to take no notice, or care that Marek referred to them as a weakness. Instead they closed the distance between them and their son.

"It's okay, son," said Naman as he approached. "We're here to help you. You no longer need to be under the thumb of such a tyrant."

"There is still much that he knows, father," said Marek. "I wish to learn."

"We can sort through all of his things after he's dealt with. We cannot let him continue on his path. You, however, you can still come home."

Jamilla put out a hand and laid it on Marek's face. Slowly, Marek raised his own hand and placed it atop his mother's, pressing her hand into his cheek and closing his eyes.

"I would wish for that," he said. "Sometimes I wish I was back in Riverbrook, that I could take over the store when you got older."

Maybe get married,” he spared a glance for Jak. She swallowed. It was true that had they all stayed in Riverbrook, the two of them might have had a future together. Everybody had already thought they were a perfect match for each other.

“Things will be different,” said Naman, putting his arms around both his wife and son. “We cannot change that. But perhaps we can still have a peaceful life together. We can help you recover from the horrible things Cain has put you through.”

“Horrible.” Marek tested the word on his tongue. “Yes, they were horrible. I wonder if they weren’t necessary.”

“Of course not, my boy,” said Jamilla. “No one should have to endure the trauma of being turned into a killing machine, of being tortured, and forced to become a tool.”

“I am not a tool, mother,” said Marek, sharply.

“Which is why you must stand aside,” Jak cut in. “Let us take it from here, or help us in our goals. Only then can you prove that you are not a pawn of Cain.”

Perhaps she was being a little harsh, but the words needed to be said. Marek claimed to be independent, to not work for Cain, and many of his actions had suggested as much. He had helped them on more than one occasion, even though he chose to stay with Cain, against her better judgement.

Marek met her eyes. “I understand. I must help remove my restraints, become my own man.”

“Exactly,” said Naman, pulling his family close. “Without Cain’s influence, you can choose your own path.”

Marek’s face lit up with something like understanding. He looked less burdened. “You’re right,” he said. “Thank you.”

He put a hand on each of his parents’ faces. They smiled at him, and clutched at his hands with their own. Jak felt a wave of something like relief flood through her. Though something was a bit off. It felt far too dramatic for her liking. Her father had never shown this much sentiment, and it made her a bit...

A brand flared to life on Marek’s forearm. Jak immediately sought it out to identify it.

A Gifter brand. That was new. He hadn’t had it the last time they met, and now that he did...

“No!” she screamed.

Two brands formed on both Jamilla and Naman’s faces. Jak couldn’t make them out in the darkness, but it wouldn’t matter what they were. Marek was not an Oren. He couldn’t give people multiple brands! Not without...

Jamilla and Naman screamed, and the sound was perhaps the most horrifying thing Jak had ever heard. The screams were high-pitched

and full of pain.

They were demon screams.

The Gifter brand on Marek's arm extinguished itself, but Jamilla and Naman dropped to the ground, writhing in pain. Skellig lit up her palms with Flamedancing, Naem did the same, and Seph tensed.

Jak did nothing, only stared with open mouth as her friends' skin faded to a sickly gray color, their teeth elongated, as did their nails. Their screams continued to fill the cavern, likely enough to wake Cain, though he was far from Jak's mind at the moment.

"Fascinating," said Marek. Then several Thunder brands lit on his arms, and giant bolts of electricity burst from his fingers, directly into the hearts of his parents. Their screams intensified, then were cut off abruptly, and both lay still on the floor, their bodies smoking from the lightning.

"You...Marek!" Jak screamed at him. She was about to launch herself at him, before a pair of unusually strong hands grabbed her from behind. She looked back to see Seph standing there, a tear in his eye, but otherwise expressionless.

"Cain has always been short sighted when it comes to his demons," Marek said, his voice exhibiting complete calm. "There's so much potential there, far more than he sees." He took one step towards them, and Skellig and Naem flinched, adjusting their stances and readying for a fight.

But all Jak could do was ask, "Why?"

Marek looked down at his dead parents. "It's like they said. I need to be free from that which influences me. They were a weakness. And now they are gone, and I am stronger."

"They were talking about Cain!" Jak screamed at him.

"And you are free to deal with him as you wish," said Marek. "I might even help you, as you suggested."

"We will never fight alongside you," Skellig spat.

"It is your choice," said Marek. "Well then, I must therefore step aside."

"We will discuss this later, boy," said a hard voice from behind him. Marek only smiled at Jak as all their attention turned to the dark shape silhouetted against the pale crystal light beyond, holding a staff in one hand, and seeming to grow in the dim light.

Cain was here.

Jak didn't even need to signal the others. They all knew their jobs. Skellig and Naem darted to either side of the cave, raising their fists and readying fire to shower down on Cain. But the real shocker came as Seph began to transform.

This part of the cave was smaller, but there was still room for the dragon. A warm light seemed to grow out of Seph, clashing with the

pale blue light of the nearby crystals. For the first time, Jak caught a good look of Cain's face, as he stopped in his tracks. Marek's face also went slack. They hadn't expected this.

Jak stared at them both, feeling anger bubble up inside her. Seph had revealed himself, their best wild card. Now it was time to end them.

"Bring this cave down," she ordered.

Seph's dragon belly began to glow. Cain immediately moved.

Marek dove forward, propelling himself with some Telekinesis towards the back of the cave, where the starship would be. "No, you can't!"

Flames gushed out of Seph's maw, racing past Jak and the others, and filling the cavern beyond. Cain's quick thinking barely saved him as the flames just missed his body. But Marek, on the other hand, caught the full brunt of it.

The torrent of fire hit him square in the back, the force pushing him forward until he crashed into the wall on the other side, not far from the starship itself. He lay there unmoving, his back burning.

Jak felt a stab of pain, and not just for seeing what happened to the man who had once been her friend. She looked down to see a sword embedded in her gut. Looking back up, she saw Cain standing there, the Pillar of Time in one hand. He must have used it to get to her fast enough.

Jak stepped forward, swinging her hand down at the flat of the blade that was still exposed. It snapped in half, most of it still embedded in her stomach. Skellig and Naem converged on Cain, sending out waves of Telekinetic energy to keep him there.

Cain disappeared, the Pillar of Time aiding his supernatural speed. Jak looked down at her gut, took hold of the remaining length of the sword, and pulled it out. Yes, there was pain, but it was far from what should have felt without all her Healing brands. Even as the blade left her body, the wound knit itself together, and Jak felt the pain flood out of her.

Seph roared in the back, and Jak turned to see Cain there, his hands on Seph's side, spewing torrents of Thunder magic into the dragon. Jak had seen him do the exact same thing before, as a way of subduing the dragon before it had merged with Seph. He was hurting her husband.

In response, another rush of flames erupted from Seph's mouth, hitting the ceiling, then the walls as Seph thrashed from side to side.

His tail beat against the stone as he tried to whip it around to bash at Cain. Yet the demon king merely disappeared in a burst of speed and reappeared on Seph's other side, repeating the process of electrocuting the dragon.

"You will not touch my husband!" Jak screamed at the top of her lungs. Without even pausing to think about what she was doing, she used the Pillar of Space to propel her forward. Even though Cain and Seph were only a few feet away, she would need the magic to get to Cain before he escaped using his own Pillar.

She appeared just inches from where Cain stood, but his reactions were too quick. Immediately he froze time and used it to get out of her reach.

Suddenly he was behind her, and Thunder lanced into her as it had into Seph. All her limbs ceased to function as torrential power coursed through her.

She activated her own Thunder brand, using it to absorb what Cain threw at her. Cain stopped shocking her just as she turned on her back and shot a fireball at him. It missed, and slammed into the ceiling above.

A low rumble shook the place. Jak spared a glance at the ceiling, then widened her eyes and rolled out of the way just in time as a stalactite hit the place where she had been. This cave was not stable.

A fireball collided with her where she lay. The force was enough to crunch her into the ground beneath, and singe away part of her clothing and flesh as well, though that began to heal itself the moment the flames dissipated.

Regardless, Jak was winded. But the moment she caught her breath, another fireball blasted into her. The rumbling in the cave was growing stronger.

Cain stood over her, sending fireball after fireball at her. And it was working. With each recovery, her flesh was less and less healed by the time the next fireball hit her.

A roar from Seph and more fire shot into Cain, accompanied by fireballs from both Skellig and Naem, about whom Cain had all but forgotten.

The collective firepower slammed Cain backward into the distant cave wall, near where Marek's body still lay. Was he dead? Marek probably wasn't as resilient as Cain, at least as far as Jak knew. But she couldn't worry about him right now.

Rising to her feet, she didn't waste time. Using the Pillar of Space, she propelled herself forward so she was next to Cain. She reached for him, but immediately he sped out of her reach. He knew that if she touched him, she would take him away to a place where she would hold all the advantage. So he wisely avoided her grip.

Seph lumbered forward, peering his head around the corner to where the starship lay. With another bellow, he shot fire out of his maw towards the ancient Relic.

"No!" said Cain, appearing in front of the starship, and throwing up both arms. A wall of Telekinetic energy burst forth and immediately blocked the onslaught of dragon fire. Instead of going straight, the fire scattered in every direction. Cain set his feet, holding the barrier above his head, straining as he did so.

Jak could understand that strain. She had done the very same thing to protect the Pillar of Space from dragon fire. It had taken all her concentration, and had ultimately cost her mother's life.

Yet even as dragon fire spread out from the shield, heating the rock on all sides of the chamber, and causing more stone to fall from the ceiling, Jak felt triumph fill her.

Cain's need to preserve his parents' craft would be his undoing.

Using the Pillar of Space, Jak brought herself past Cain's barrier, to stand opposite him. Then she sped forward and wrapped her arms around him, using all her strength to hold him like a vice.

Then she transported both of them out of there.

Once again, she had a brief dispute with the magic of the Pillar of Eternity. It would be so easy to take Cain to the very depths of the ocean, or the vacuum of space. She had the power. The Pillars possessed such abilities. Abilities far beyond their own self-imposed limitations.

But the Pillar resisted. Perhaps she could break its will, do with it what Cain had done to the Pillar of Time. She was powerful enough that maybe she could do it. The Pillar of Space seemed to sense her thoughts, stilling its magic and waiting for her verdict.

No, she would not stoop to Cain's level, even if it meant making the job a lot harder.

The Pillar brought them to the same place as before, hovering over the ocean on the other side of their planet. Jak stared at Cain who stared back. Then Cain kicked at her, trying to get loose.

The kick took her by surprise, and he broke away from her. Then with incredible speed, he flew away. Jak stared after him. Cain was smart, she realized. He knew that if he were to get away here, he would stay alive. He still had a chance while on Earth.

Jak called on the Pillar of Space to propel her forward, straight into Cain's path.

Unimaginable pain lanced through her as Cain rammed into her. Stars shone in her eyes, and she stared down to see Cain's entire fist embedded in her gut. His eyes met hers and he grinned.

He had been ready for her. He had planned this. Cain extracted his fist, and immediately reached for the Pillar of Space in Jak's hand. Jak

was so distracted by the pain, even with her Healing brands working to help, that she almost forgot about the Pillar. As Cain tugged on it, she tightened her grip. Cain pulled, but she did not budge. She held onto the Pillar of Space for all she was worth.

A blow landed on her thigh with such force as to break all her bones. She cried out, and watched as Cain raised the Pillar of Time for another such blow.

She winced as the Pillar came crashing down on her thigh again and again. The Pillar did not pass through her leg completely, though it broke skin, even with her Toughness brands, and that wasn't to mention the bones that broke, realigned, and broke again.

It was pain unimaginable. Yet she could not let go of the Pillar of Space. She would not.

The Pillar remained in her hand even as Cain tried to practically tear her fingers off to get at it.

As the Pillar of Time came down for another hit, this time Jak's arm shot out.

She felt her fingers break and reknit themselves as her palm came in contact with the Pillar of Time for the first time in months. And she held it.

Cain tried to swing it away, to take it back for himself. But Jak put all her effort into holding on to both Pillars.

Cain did not miss a beat. This time, instead of physically trying to wrench the Pillars out of her hands, he tried another tactic.

Mentally, she felt both Pillars respond to Cain. The Pillars were held by two beings of equal power, but opposite temperament. Cain was trying to use them, to convince them to work for him.

Jak fought back.

It was a mental battle every bit as difficult as the physical beating she had just endured. The Pillars were torn between two masters, and it took all her willpower to keep Cain from wrestling them from her mind. "Don't deny me what is mine by right," Cain shouted through the rushing air. Only then did Jak realize they were falling through the sky, their concentration so focused on their mental battle that neither paid attention to keeping them aloft with Telekinesis. The ocean below grew closer and closer.

"You lost your birthright the moment you killed innocents." Jak shouted back. And with a burst of mental energy, she called on the Pillars once again.

The air pressure around them rippled, and the world changed. They were in an unfamiliar environment, still flying through the air, but the sky was red. The air was heavy, though she could still breathe.

Cain did not seem to notice, but continued to fight for dominance over the Pillars.

Jak kept fighting.

Once again, the air around them rippled, and this time Jak's skin prickled as they fell through an icy atmosphere, this one so devoid of light that Jak could no longer see Cain in front of her. Her skin began to freeze as wherever they were was so cold it began instantly turning their warm bodies into solid ice.

Ripple.

They were moving through other planets. That much Jak was sure of. This one looked a lot like Illadar or Earth, but instead of green trees, everything was a beautiful yellow. Giant waterfalls fell from cliffs that looked high enough for three Mt. Harafasts stacked on top of one another. It was beautiful.

Cain was beginning to realize what was happening, for his concentration broke. Jak seized the opportunity. She transported them away to Illadar, but Cain realized what she was doing at the last moment, and brought his will back to fight her.

Ripple.

They were on another planet, this one so hot it scorched them both, and would have likely vaporized them had they not both had Healing brands.

Ripple.

Jak got her first look at alien life, great, tall beings that looked much like Yewin and the Bright Elves, but without their characteristic glow. They stood in vast halls, and several heads turned to look at the strangers that had just appeared falling through their enormous chamber.

Ripple.

This planet was full of tall trees that looked oddly like giant, purple jellyfish.

Ripple. A planet with nothing but enormous green boulders.

Ripple. Another with rainbow skies.

Ripple, ripple, ripple, ripple, rippleripplerippleripple.

Tuning out what was happening around her, Jak closed her eyes and concentrated. There was more going on here than just her will being pitted against Cain's. The Pillars were trying to tell her something, or at least the Pillar of Space was. The Pillar of Time seemed oddly dormant.

There was somewhere where the Pillar of Space wanted to go, someplace relevant to her and Cain. But it couldn't get there while Cain and Jak tried to force it to do what they wanted. It needed the freedom to take her away, just as it had helped her find Cain even when he was using the Pillar of Time.

So she stopped trying to lead them to Illadar, and instead surrendered to the Pillar's magic, adding her will to its own.

It was enough.

Ripple.

They materialized on a dead world. Their falling ceased as they crashed into its gray earth, and rolled over and over. Jak instinctively let go of the Pillar of Time, letting Cain take it back, while simultaneously kicking out at Cain's other hand holding the Pillar of Space. Between that and his surprise upon hitting the ground, Cain's fingers slipped from her Pillar, and the two of them separated.

Jak got to her feet and felt her vision swim. She had not used this much power from the Pillars of Eternity since taking her army from Illadar to Earth, if even then.

Cain got up on his arms and knees. "Did you see all of that? That's what you and I could have had. You could have ruled by my side across worlds, and yet you squandered the opportunity, for what? To create a world for a people who will one day forget your part in their salvation. To save new races that will rise up to threaten humanity one day."

"What they may choose to do one day does not have any bearing on the here and now," said Jak. "And right now, you are the threat. And we will crush you, just as heroes of the future will crush those who threaten peace, freedom, and equality."

"You deceive yourself!" he yelled. "You have no vision, no foresight. You will never create lasting peace."

Jak closed her eyes, but spoke anyway. "Maybe not. But lasting peace doesn't have to be my goal. I can set laws in place, I can eliminate threats, but in the end, people are responsible for themselves." She reopened her eyes. "Self-responsibility. I will make sure they get that privilege. Let them do with it what they will. And if peace does not last, I will trust that others will rise to the occasion, and do what I have done."

"We could have made our own peace. Where you and I would have lived forever, and ensured that no one would ever step out of line."

"And that is exactly where you fail to see. Forcing people to be good isn't freedom. In order for true peace to flourish, it must be a choice."

Cain scowled, knowing it would do no good to argue further. Instead his eyes darted around them. "What is this place?"

Jak followed his gaze, seeing nothing but boring, flat land in every direction. The sky was also gray, full of enough dust and perhaps other things that blocked out the sun. Only a pale light shone through. She coughed as a mouthful of the dust choked up her lungs. This place was not hospitable. Yet, this was the place the Pillar had chosen.

"This is where the Pillar wanted to take us?" she said, steadying herself on her feet.

“It must be faulty,” he replied. “There’s nothing here.”

There was once. Jak started as a voice sprung up in her head.

“What was that?” she said, looking around.

“You’re losing your mind,” said Cain, looking at her with tired eyes.

Jak stared down at the Pillar of Eternity. Had it just spoken to her for the first time since plucking it off the top of Mt. Knot?

“What was here?” she said aloud, directing her comment at the Pillar.

Cain remained where he was, his eyes narrowed and staring at her, though looking tired enough to not be an immediate threat.

This was once the origin, said the voice in her head. *This was once the land of the ancestors.*

Jak’s eyes widened and she looked up at the world around them, suddenly understanding.

“You always wanted to return to your home world,” she said, looking at Cain.

“What are you talking about,” he said, squaring his shoulders and looking like he might attack her again. “Who told you that?”

“Marek did,” she said. “When he first showed me your starship.”

Cain’s face grew dark. “I will kill that boy.”

He might not have to, but Jak ignored the comment. “He told me your ultimate goal was to return to the civilization that gave you life.”

She waited for a reply. He stared at her with those stone cold eyes. “My father and mother were fools to think they could never return. To grow complacent with the pitiful planet they landed on. Our ancestors were capable of so much, and yet they would rather work all day for no more than a mouthful of food.”

“And yet,” Jak said, feeling understanding flow into her from the Pillar. “This is what all that capability brought our ancestors. Ruin.”

Cain’s head swiveled in every direction. “My ancestors would never have lived in such a place.”

“It wasn’t like this when they lived here. They did this to the planet. This is all that’s left.”

“No, you lie!” Cain shouted.

“Then you accuse the Pillar of lying. It knew you wanted to come here, so it brought you. And now this is where I will leave you.”

The runes on the Pillar of Space began to glow. There was a certain irony with leaving Cain in the land of his ancestors, a land they had destroyed. Her part was done. She would return to Illadar, even if it meant abandoning the Pillar of Time. Cain would not hurt anyone else here.

“No, you cannot!” Cain flew through the air at her, covering the close distance before Jak could even blink.

Ripple.

They were falling through the sky once again, but this time Jak

knew exactly where they had gone. A glimpse of two moons in the blue sky confirmed it. They were back on Illadar.

But Cain had come too, she had underestimated him again. He clutched at her leg, having barely caught it as she had transported them away.

Jak kicked at him, but he held on, reaching for the Pillar of Space, whilst still somehow managing to hold onto the Pillar of Time.

Jak waved the Pillar of Space out of his reach. There was nothing more than to continue with the original plan now.

She activated her Telekinesis brand, using it to guide their landing. Glancing at the ground, she could see their destination. The Pillar had brought them close to their settlement, exactly where they needed to be.

With a crunch, they landed just outside the cave. Cain broke away and rolled, but to his credit, still managing to throw a fireball in her direction as he tumbled.

Jak threw up a hand and deflected the fireball with Telekinesis just in time. Then she sped forward, catching him in the gut and hurling him backward, closer to the cave. But he managed to get his feet underneath him, activate his own Telekinesis brands, and use them to stop their momentum.

“So this is Illadar,” he said, glancing around. Jak swallowed. He must have caught a glimpse of the settlers who remained, and put two and two together. “I’m going to enjoy burning it all to the ground after I finish you!”

With the last word, he threw a punch at Jak, but not just any punch. Fire sprouted from his fingertips, and came to a point using what Jak could only guess was telekinesis. Her eyes widened and she sidestepped the blow, catching her first good look at a telekinetic blade full of fire coming out of his hands.

She could have probably used a weapon right about then. Perhaps her father’s spear, which had been branded to be more resilient. But

she couldn't wish for that which she could not have. She punched back at him, throwing every bit of strength she had into the blow. It connected, but only barely, throwing Cain off balance as it clipped his shoulder.

It felt odd to Jak, who had literally created a world, and wielded some of the greatest magic in the universe, to resort to something as simple as a punch. Granted, it wasn't just a punch. It held all the power of each of her Strength brands behind it. But it was still a simple act by comparison to all she had done.

Nevertheless, it was all she needed. With Cain off balance, she jumped forward, grabbing him by the waist, and pouring all her energy into her Telekinesis. They flew forward, straight into the nearby cave, which opened wide to receive them.

Jak felt her powers weaken, and she tumbled to the ground, Cain tumbling with her. They came to rest in a small cloud of dirt.

Jak's muscles protested as she tried to push herself upright. She'd underestimated how much she needed all of her Strength brands, though she still had some power left. Yet if she felt tired, it was nothing compared to how Cain looked.

"Wha...what have you done to me?" Cain writhed on the ground, trying and failing to push himself up to his feet. His skin suddenly looked more loose, less attached to his bones. It seemed to almost flow around him.

"Take a look for yourself," said Jak, raising her head to look at the walls of the cave. Cain joined her, craning his neck to get a better look.

The cave was covered in metal panels, fused to the rock with the help of the gnomes and dwarves, but there was one other aspect that explained why Cain was having trouble exerting any power.

The panels were covered in Void brands.

"This...this..." Cain had no words.

"We started working on this place the moment I returned to Illadar several months ago." Jak explained. "While you were breaking the Pillar of Time to your will, we were crafting the perfect trap."

"Void brands don't work on me." he said, in disbelief. "Only because you have about a hundred Anti-brands. I know, I counted." said Jak. "I didn't get a perfect count, but I knew enough to give an approximate guess. But I created extra Void brands to make sure. In this cave, we have over a thousand."

Cain raised a hand to point at her. It quavered. "But you, you don't..."

His voice was failing, he must be taking this harder than she thought. "I am weakened, yes," she said, responding to his unasked question. "You have over a hundred Anit-brands. Whereas I gave

myself one for every Void brand I stuck in this cave.”

With that she turned, lifting up the dirt-covered tatters of her shirt to reveal not hundreds, but over a thousand Anti-brands on the flesh of her back. They were tiny, smaller than a common coin, but they sat next to each other in a perfect pattern, covering her entire back, reaching up to her neck, and down below her waist. No one but Seph had seen them before now, since she kept those areas covered, but she had been slowly working on it for months.

Cain coughed, and Jak thought she saw blood splatter the cave floor. Was he dying? Had he grown so dependant on his abilities that they were literally keeping him alive? She supposed that's why his skin had never fully healed since his first encounter with the dragon. Perhaps his Healing brands hadn't been enough, that their healing abilities had only managed to keep his body from falling apart.

“In a sense,” Jak went on, “you gave me this idea. Or rather your influence. The Royal Priest kept me in a Void-branded cage once, and I nearly died. You came and visited me remember? You thought that was the end of me, and that was perhaps the first time you truly underestimated what I'm willing to do.”

Cain began to crawl, inching his way towards the exit, to where the Void brands would no longer have any effect. Blood trailed behind him, and Jak watched him go. At this rate, his body would give out long before he could reach the exit. But she was not going to give him the chance.

She placed herself between him and his destination. He put his head down on the ground, finally acknowledging his defeat. At last, he was broken.

He grabbed at her legs. “Please,” he pleaded. “Please, don't let it end like this. Take me back to the world of my ancestors. I want to go back.”

“You had that chance.”

She kicked his grip off her leg, and he cried out as her mild effort broke the now-fragile bones in his arms.

Jak wandered nearby to pick up the Pillar of Time, holding both staves in each arm now. She tried to communicate with the Pillar of Time, at least to give it some assurance that it was in the right hands now, but it did not respond.

Instead, she activated it, sending the traditional mental impulse to turn on the Pillar of Time and use its power to move at supernatural speeds. And it worked, albeit slightly. Time froze around her, but it didn't feel as still and calming as it had before. She would have to look into it later.

Letting the magic drop, she walked back to where Cain still lay panting on the floor. She set the Pillars down against the side of the

cave, then crouched down next to Cain till her arms were resting on her knees.

Cain's face had gone gray and pale, his skin flaking away as though made of dust.

"I'm sorry it had to be this way," said Jak. "We would have helped you reach any world you wanted if you had asked, and shown yourself free of ill intent."

He did not answer. Jak wasn't even sure he could anymore. His mouth opened but all that came out was a dry rasp.

"Perhaps we could have ruled side by side," she said. "But not through slavery or genocide. These are what marked you as someone to destroy, not to join. I am sorry."

She stayed there and watched as Cain's body slowly faded to dust. The man was older than old, and it seemed that even with those cryo chambers back at his hideout, and the aid of all his brands, take away his powers and he was nothing more than literal dirt.

A head poked itself into the cave. Jak turned to see who it was, before smiling slightly and going back to staring at the place where Cain had once been. "Hello, Royal Priest," she said. "You know, you might want to consider taking on a name, now that the queen is dead, and our civilization is basically no more."

The Priest didn't reply to her comment, but instead took several steps inside, and observed the pile of rags and dust that had once been Cain. "You...you beat him?" he said, his voice quavering.

Jak nodded, "He couldn't withstand this many Void brands."

The Royal Priest stood still. "Then we are all free."

"For now," Jak said, remembering something Cain had said. "We've removed one tyrant, but we can't assume there won't be others. Someday at least."

"When that day comes, heroes will fight in your memory. Your example will inspire them."

Jak looked away from Cain's remains to stare at the Priest in surprise. "Since when did you get all sentimental like that?"

"I'm sorry, uh, Jak," he said her name like he wasn't used to doing so. "But you've inspired many, including myself. I was once afraid of you, I hated you. But you have shown me a better way. You have given me hope of a world without hate. Where one person would save another, even when that person had done them wrong."

Jak smiled, remembering the time when she had rescued the Royal Priest from Cain. "You have seen more than most in your circumstances. People like Cain, they don't change."

"Perhaps not, but we villains are not bound by such a fate," he said, eagerly.

"And you're living proof of that," Jak confirmed. "Tell me, what do

you plan to do now that our enemy is gone.”

He hesitated. “Do you plan to return to Earth?”

“Yes,” she said. “To collect my armies and bring all who wish to join us back here. We should pick up what Relics we can find as well, and bring those.”

“And after that?”

Jak took a deep breath. “I think it best, for the safety of humanity and the Fae, that we remain separate for a time. Some of the Fae have so few members that I could count them on two hands. They need time to rest, time when they won’t fear for their lives.”

“So you plan to cut off ties with Earth.”

“Not completely,” said Jak. “But if it’s my choice, I would choose to put away the Pillars for a time, until the world is ready for us.”

“That could be a long time.”

Jak met his eyes and gave him a slight smile. “Not if there are more people like you, willing to set aside their biases for good.”

He returned her smile, though there was a hint of sadness there. “I’m afraid it was your rescue that caused me to think differently. It might not have happened otherwise.”

“Well then, let’s hope there are more people like me on Earth as well.”

“In that sense, maybe. But no one will ever be quite like you, Lady Oren.”

Jak almost chuckled as he used the honorific name people had for her. “Thank you, Royal Priest. But you have not answered my question. What do you want?”

He hesitated. “Forgive me, I have valued your hospitality, and this place has opened my eyes tremendously. But I would ask that you send me back to Earth.”

“You heard what I said. Once the rest of us are gone, it’s doubtful that we will ever return in your lifetime.”

“I know this,” he said. “But I believe I could do more good there than I can here.”

Jak let that sink in before slowly nodding. “I think I understand. What would you do there?”

The Royal Priest sat next to her. “I would start by trying to rally together all who remain. Rebuild after what Cain did to our nation.”

“You would make yourself King?” Jak asked, with a raised eyebrow.

“King, no,” he said. “I am not meant for such a thing. I would remain a Priest.” He looked her straight in the eye. “A Priest of Illadar.”

Jak’s mouth formed a half-smile. “Very well, Priest of Illadar. I will happily take you home.”

About an hour later, Jak had brought the Royal Priest to

Foothold, but quickly left to find her friends in the Hollow Peaks. The Pillars of Space and Time were both working properly, but there was still something sluggish about the Pillar of Time. Jak's best guess was that it was tainted in some way, after it broke under Cain's influence.

Thankfully, it was the Pillar of Space that she needed to travel between worlds. Using it, she set off in search of Skellig, Naem, and her husband.

She arrived outside the cave, which was the first thing that surprised her. She had intended to go back inside, to the last place she had seen her comrades. But instead, she was just outside the crack in the mountain that led to Cain's secret hideout.

"Jak!" came a yell from behind her. She turned to see Seph bounding toward her. Behind him stood both Skellig and Naem around a small campfire, both of them scrambling to their feet and looking overjoyed to see her.

Seph barreled into her, his arms crushing her in a literal dragon-like hug. Jak, happy to have so many Toughness brands, hugged him back just as hard.

"We weren't sure if we would see you again," Seph said as he broke the embrace.

"What happened after I left?" she asked after leaning on her toes to kiss him.

"Well...to be honest," Seph rubbed the back of his neck with one hand. He looked a bit embarrassed.

"Immediately after you left, his dragon fire and unchecked tail brought the entire mountain down on us." Skellig said, coming close enough to place one hand on Jak's shoulder. "Naem and I barely made it out with the bodies," she waved a hand back at their camp fire.

Jak's face fell as she spotted the corpses of Naman and Jamilla. Their bodies and faces were covered, but Jak knew that they would appear as demons now after what Marek had done to them.

"Seph came flying out of the top of the mountain, pushing through

all that rock and everything.” said Naem. “Then he insisted that we stay here for when you returned.”

“And what of Marek?” Jak asked, turning to look back at the crack in the mountain.

None of them spoke at first. “We...uh, didn’t have a chance to retrieve his body,” said Seph. “He was still unconscious when the mountain came crashing down. There’s no way he survived.”

“And Cain’s starship?”

“Also caught in the rubble.”

“Good,” said Jak, bottling up her emotions for now. “It’s time I took you home, then.”

“Jak,” Seph rubbed her shoulder. “It’s okay to mourn for him despite what he’s done. He was taken in by Cain, but he was your friend.”

“He deserves none of my pity,” said Jak. “He’s no better than Cain, and his body can stay buried along with my memories of him.”

“Jak,” Seph began.

“I won’t hear another word of it,” she said. “Cain is dead. It’s time for all of us to return to Illadar.”

The revelation that Cain was dead was enough to shut them up. Jak said nothing more for the time being, not wanting to relive her battle with the demon king. Not yet. Instead, she took Seph, Skellig, and Naem back to Foothold, where they made the announcement that they had won. There were no more demons, and their great enemy had been defeated at last.

For some reason, Jak did not feel the cheer. She waited for everyone to prepare themselves to leave, a process that took about a day, before finally emerging from her quarters to open a portal back to Illadar. Almost everyone in the fortress agreed to go, though a few stayed behind, including the Royal Priest. As Jak walked through the portal, he stood on the side, watching. She spared a glance and he waved at her just before she disappeared through the portal.

The Royal Priest was, oddly, what gave her the most hope. He was evidence that a bad person could change. Hopefully that change would aid him in rebuilding the kingdom as a place of peace for all who lived there, though she would discourage any Fae from visiting in the near future. The world wasn’t ready for them.

Over the next few days, she spent most of her time aiding in the recruitment process. They had to travel all over the nation to find the Sky Fae scouts she had left, not to mention anyone who wished to join them on Illadar. All were welcome for now, but that door would not stay open for long.

“What do you think will happen here,” said Seph one day as she kept a portal open for the latest recruits to enter. They were set up at

Riverbrook, her old home, a place she had always had an easier time of reaching with the Pillars of Eternity. Something about the magic just connected well with her hometown.

"I don't know," she said, staring off at the distant river where she had once played as a girl.

"There are no more Gifters here," said Seph. "They all either came with us, or were killed by Cain. Magic on Earth will die out."

"I'm not so sure," said Jak, feeling the magic of the Pillars of Eternity hum under her fingertips. "Magic doesn't exactly work that way. We have brands and Relics that channel the magic, but they aren't the source of that magic."

Seph nodded, "I think I understand. Creatures like dragons are beings of magic, though they have no brands."

"The Fae as well," Jak said. "Some of their changes were triggered by proximity to Relics, but it was the magic that changed them, not the Relic itself."

"So you think Earth will continue to have branding and Fae transformations?"

Jak shook her head. "I don't think so. This world has been wounded by all of this, I can feel it. It wants peace. I imagine if magic does ever manifest itself here again, it will be more subtle, more elemental. It will lack the channels our ancestors created in the form of brands."

"I suppose that's good then," Seph said, placing his arm around her. "So what will you do now?"

Jak swallowed, knowing what he meant. But all she said was, "I will go back to Illadar."

"Neither of us will be able to go back to our old lives," he said. "There are six thousand people looking up to us, not to mention the future of Illadar."

Jak closed her eyes and a tear dropped down her cheek. Once, there had been seven thousand. They had lost so much in their battle against Cain and his demons. Too much.

"I know," she said.

"They will need a leader." Seph continued.

"I know," she repeated.

A pause, then, "Are you up for it?"

"Do I have a choice?" Jak ran a hand over her cheek to catch the tears.

"You always have a choice," he said, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"Do I?" she said. "All the talk about destiny, particularly when we were on Mt. Knot, and I went through the trials there. Yes, I can choose to shirk responsibility, let others suffer or die while I spend my

time indulging myself. But I know that's not going to happen, and whatever force of nature is out there knows it too. If I'm placed in situations where my values dictate what direction I take, is that really freedom to choose?"

"Well," Seph hesitated while he chose his words carefully. "I suppose it might seem like that, especially if you're frequently faced with such choices. But it's still you who chooses them, Jak. At the very least, you chose to accept the values given you by your father and others. And sure, those values dictate what you do now, but you could choose other values."

Jak shook her head. "I'm not sure I could. I don't know how much of who I am was my choice, or just the way I was shaped."

"Yet if your choices do align with your values, with all that is good and right, does it really matter if your choices are dictated or not? The outcome is ultimately good. After all, you chose me." A soft laugh escaped her throat. "One of the few times the choices I was given resulted in something I wanted for myself."

"I'm glad you chose me too," he said. "But I also chose you. You're not alone in this."

He was right. She had made some tough decisions, some that set aside her personal comfort in favor of helping others. But she wasn't the only one doing that. All of them: Seph, Skellig, Naem, even those like the Royal Priest had all eventually chosen to follow her, to put their paths in line with hers. Many others, like Gabriel, her old teacher, or Karlona, her mother, had died in pursuit of the same goals.

"What more do the prophecies say about Illadar?" she asked, leaning her head into his shoulder.

Seph shrugged. "The Book of Illadar and the writings of Abel do not specify much. Most of his prophecy has been fulfilled."

"Most?"

"Well, there's still one more race to form, at which point there will be twelve. And there are hints at other heroes that will fight for the world. But for now, all it says is that Illadar will be a place of peace."

Jak took a deep breath. "Illadar cannot have peace if it is built on anarchy."

"Indeed," said Seph.

She stood up, feeling a new sense of determination in her. She looked down at Seph. "You will be with me?"

He rose to meet her, "every step of the way."

Jak set her jaw. "Then I will choose to be the first of Illadar's rulers, to set the laws that govern the people, and hopefully avoid tyrants like Cain or even Queen Telma in the future. I will make peace. No," she corrected herself, "I will help others to choose peace."

Seph smiled warmly. It wasn't the dazzling smile that had first

attracted Jak to him, but for some reason it filled her with love, and with confidence. They had a unique opportunity here, where the entire population of a planet, small though it was, respected her as its leader.

Division would come among the people eventually, but for now they were united in purpose, and there was much Jak could do to progress their civilization from its outset. She was young yet, but she would have counselors and advisors. And Seph would be with her. And the ancestors willing, she would have many years ahead to turn Illadar into a thriving world.



AND SO THE legend of Jak was born, the first queen of Illadar, and the greatest Oren the planet would ever know.

Within a few years, she and the people of Illadar cut off all communication with Earth, choosing instead to focus on their own growth and healing. Laws were made, local governments were organized, Illadar was explored. Occasionally, there were disputes between cultures, between Fae, yet all eleven races forever recognized Jak as their queen, the only ruler to achieve such unity in all the history of Illadar to follow.

Seph, the Dragon Shifter, ruled by her side until that fateful day when she mysteriously disappeared. Her husband would always insist that his wife was not lost, nor was she dead. He continued to rule in her stead, his dragon nature giving him supernatural long life. But even on his deathbed, surrounded by his great-great-grandchildren and their posterity, he would never admit that his wife was dead. "She passed on," he would say, which many took to mean the same thing as death, even when Seph would correct them. Yet despite all their searching, no one ever found the site of her grave.

The Pillars of Eternity remained in Seph's possession until his death. In his lifetime, no one besides Jak or Naem were able to use it, but they remained heirlooms of the kingdom long after Seph had passed on.

And so, Illadar began to flourish, and in time, Jak's memory faded to legend and myth. Even her full name of Jakniteksnewodheghoma eventually disappeared from all but the most ancient of texts. Forever after she became known only as Jak, the first and greatest Queen of Illadar.

Epilogue

Marek sat in the cockpit of Cain's old starship, the very one that had first brought Adam and Eve to Earth nearly five thousand years previously.

He had laid near the starship until the cave began to collapse. In a last-ditch attempt, he flung himself into the ship and activated its feeble yet sufficiently powerful shields. All before the dragon or anyone else from Jak's party had managed to notice.

It would not have been enough, however, had the dragon not burst through the rubble above. If not for that, Marek would have remained buried under tons and tons of rock forever. He would have died there.

But that was not in his fate. As the dragon escaped the rubble, Marek had turned on the engines that had not seen flight in centuries. He had followed the dragon out of the mountain, hiding in its wake until at last reaching the light of the sun.

He was sure the dragon and the others had not seen him, assuming the others had even survived the cave-in. He had skimmed the mountains to the south, moving far beyond their line of sight before rocketing into the sky.

The ride was bumpy. Cain had built the ship to escape Earth's atmosphere, but Marek wasn't sure how far it could go. Perhaps it could get him as far as Illadar. Something about the planet called to him. Its formation was wonderous enough, but to have an entirely new world to explore, to conquer. That would be something special.

Of course Jak would defeat Cain, he had no doubt of that. And when she did, she would return to Illadar, the Fae would join her, and magic would likely fade into superstition on Earth. Illadar was the land of opportunity.

Marek fiddled with the controls. Despite the bumpy ride, the ship still performed properly. And as the blue sky faded to black, he saw the most impressive sight he had ever seen.

The stars winked at him, in quantities he had not thought existed. There was a whole universe more than he had even considered. What it would be like to visit every one of those stars. Relics like the Pillars

of Eternity would make such a thing possible. And perhaps one day they could translate those abilities to technology like this ship. After all, their distant ancestors, even before Adam and Eve, had used such ships to navigate the stars. Or so Cain had told him. His old master had been fixated on finding the homeworld of his forefathers. But that was short sighted. Why reach for your home when there were countless other places to visit.

Yet he could not do that from this simple starship. Now that he had escaped Earth's atmosphere, he would need to find a way to Illadar. He would start there, and perhaps someday he could continue on. He would learn all there was to learn about this vast expanse.

He pulled up a map, one that displayed the entire solar system. Cain had shown him this earlier, and it had become a source of enjoyment to look up each orb of light, representing the eight inner planets, and even more of the outer ones.

Yet now, there was one more planet to add to the list, one on the exact opposite side of the sun from Earth. Illadar.

Setting a course, he engaged the engines once again.

Something exploded behind him, throwing the ship forward in a lurch that would have flung Marek out of his seat if it hadn't been for his restraints.

His heart dropped in his throat, and he glanced out the side window to see something venting out of the rear. A slight hissing noise and a feeling of pressure around his ears only confirmed the worst. He was losing atmosphere. One of the engines must have exploded.

"No, no, no!" He checked the navigation. He was losing fuel, fast. At this rate he would never get to Illadar. And without air, it wouldn't be long before he suffocated.

But perhaps it didn't have to be that way.

Maybe he could return to Earth, crash land and find another way to Illadar. But even if he could survive reentry, without the Pillars of Eternity, it was unlikely he would ever see Illadar. There was no way he could rebuild technology like this, and humanity was far behind any hope of creating such wonders for millennia to come.

The ship was equipped with safety mechanisms to survive crashing back on Earth, but they might have been damaged by the exploding engine. He couldn't rely on them.

A thought occurred to him. There was one last option.

He turned to consider the cryo chambers in the back of the ship. What if he froze himself? The Cryochambers could function without oxygen. He could survive for countless years.

The ship rumbled again, as if trying to get him to speed up his decision. He was adrift now, but the ship's solar receptors should be

enough to keep the cryo chambers active. Cain had kept them running with nothing more than the thermal energy from those cave crystals.

There was still risk. What if his ship drifted into the sun, or another planet. There were a million ways that he could still die.

But perhaps, millennia from now, humans would develop the technology to find him, and bring him back safely, or perhaps the same would happen for the people of Illadar.

Yes, this was the only option. And if he died, he would never know it. But if he lived...well that meant, to his perspective, the future was only moments away...

The End of the Roots of Creation

Author's Note

Let me start off by saying, thank you. If you've come this far, it means you've read my entire series (at least I hope you have. If you haven't, that means you're probably very confused right about now).

This has been an incredible journey so far. Roots of Creation was my very first series, and sometimes when I go back and read the early novels, I cringe a bit. But I learned so much in writing it, and the character of Jak will always be very important to me.

Will we see her again? Well, let me first say that this is the end of this series, and her main story is over. But...that doesn't necessarily mean she won't show up in other character's stories. There are more tales to be told in the fantasy world of Illadar. But I will say this: if we do see her again, it probably won't be how you expect it.

You might also be wondering about Marek. Will we see him again? Well let's just say that there's plenty of room for it (windy face). In fact, I'm just going to tell you: yes, we'll see him again.

But for now, their stories are over, and I am moving on to other things. Next on the list is another YA fantasy series set in Arthurian Britain. In fact, I'm not the only one writing a series in that era and in my universe. Yes, I will be working with a number of authors to create a sort of shared universe of Arthurian literature. You can learn more at ArthurLegends.com.

And that will do it for the Roots of Creation series! Thank you again for tuning in this long. I can't wait to share more novels with you in the future. There's a lot coming from the Argoverse. Just wait and see.

About the Author

Jason Hamilton is an unapologetic nerd of all things science fiction and fantasy. He is the author of multiple fantasy series, as well as the Creative Director of the Arthurian Legends Universe.

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As Winter Spawns

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The Faerie Queen

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Knight Rising

Knight Purged

Knight Spellbound

Knight Fallen

Knight Broken

Knight Awakened